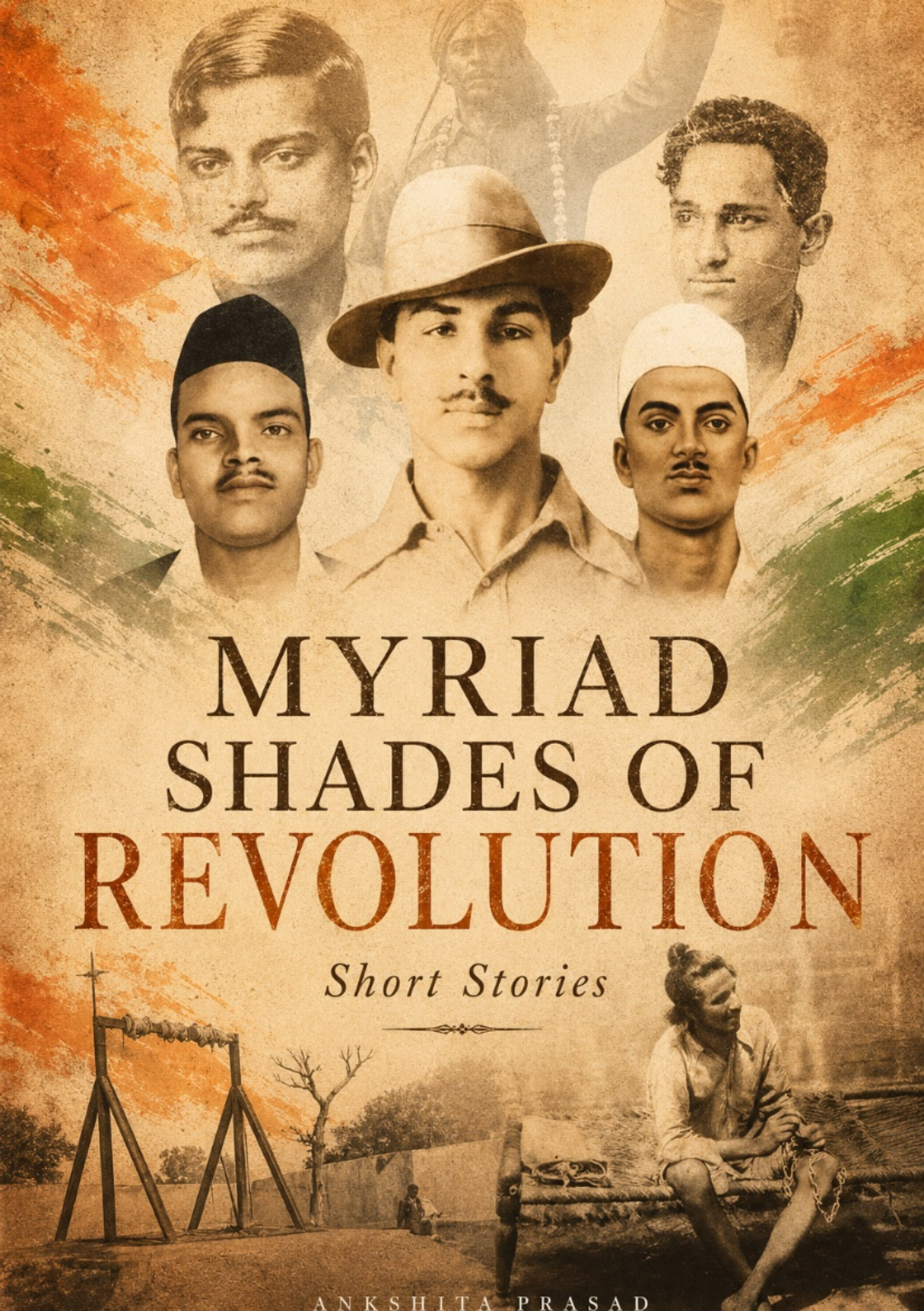
MYRIAD
SHADES OF
REVOLUTION
Short Stories
ANKSHITA PRASAD

A Note

A collection of short stories based on true events. In these brief pages, we meet Bhagat Singh and his companions as they truly were—a group of brave young men navigating the perilous path of Revolution, confronting dilemmas, facing conflicts, overcoming fears and attachments, and ultimately scripting a glorious chapter in the history of India's freedom struggle.

Written a decade ago, solely for the author's private collection, these pieces are published here without editorial embellishment, preserving their authenticity and candour. References, notes, and an appendix have been added to provide a historical context to this intimate tale.

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The Guests

In early 1929, Agra's Hing Ki Mandi became one of the secret centres of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Sukhdev, Shiv Verma, Batukeshwar Dutt and other revolutionaries stayed there while learning the science of bomb-making from Jatindra Nath Das, a Bengali revolutionary martyred in the jail hunger strike of 1929.

February 1929, Agra. 2 pm.

It was a warm winter afternoon. A busy street which was bustling till an hour ago now lay spread out in the afternoon stupor. Few shopkeepers still sat by the counters of their open shops but lethargy was evident on their faces. Or perhaps it was boredom.

The clanking of utensils and shifting of chairs could be heard from the one and only hotel on that road. A tiresome lunch hour had just reached its culmination and the young boys in the eatery were busy wrapping up their chores in order to catch up on some sleep at the earliest. This was the 'resting hour'.

The owner of the hotel, an aged man, sat impassively on a stool and stared at the empty sunlit road. Flakes of dust danced in carefree abandon in those beams of sun rays. For ages this road had not seen any change in demeanor or mood or routine. The faces of some people changed with time, and the colour of some buildings changed with taste. But nothing else. Each afternoon passed by exactly like this one, and each afternoon would forever pass the same way. The man perhaps felt the frightening monotony in the air.

But he did not know that on that day this lane housed some unusual guests. Men who had never been there earlier- men who would never be

there again. But men who were soon to immortalise this inconspicuous lane in the records of the courtroom and the portals of history. These men had assembled in a rather dilapidated building called Hing Ki Mandi- the only room in that street which lay untouched by this inactive dreariness of the afternoon. The one place that betrayed the mood of the lazy lane. And the country.

Jatin da sat holding a test tube with a bubbling liquid- around him were two men busy scribbling notes and one man heating a small stove balancing an ill fitting basin. A stout, sturdy looking man sat on the table nearby and keenly observed the group. The table was too small to accommodate the huge pile of books and papers, hence scattered bundles lay on the ground with their pages flying by. The room could have easily passed as a classroom where a harmless chemistry practical session was being conducted- if not for the presence of some revolvers peeping from the coat pockets that were hung on the railing.

A pungent smell was slowly filling the room as the Picric acid was now being heated. But the group of men hardly noticed the smell- their eyes- gleaming and bright was fixed on the liquid as their long cherished dream was bubbling on the stove- changing colours and fuming. This was the cauldron of Revolution. It felt as if each vapour that rose from the liquid carried an elusive desire with it, an unnamed hope…something that filled these men with an intoxication- the delight of an impossible accomplishment finally materialising.

“And now we shall learn about filling the bombs.”- Jatin da’s composed instruction caused a disturbance in their reveries. He was amused to see that their gazes still lingered on the stove. By now, Azad had left the table and walked up to the group. He threw one glance at the stove and just uttered an approving ‘Hmm’.

He appeared less fascinated by the contents on the stove and was instead observing the walls behind it. They had blackened with the

smoke arising from the mixture on the stove. His face turned grave as he was to now think about how they would explain these marks to the landlord without arousing any suspicion.

And then, there was the problem of the smell which had now become quite strong. Azad immediately sensed that the smell would spread out and get the neighbours questioning them in no time. He saw that none of the boys had noticed it yet. He knew it was left to him, as always , to take care of the practical considerations of their actions.

“Sadashiv, start burning camphor immediately. Get some incense sticks too- the smell needs to be camouflaged.”

The group of boys now finally woke up from their exalted states. In a flash they were on their feet- the ‘class’ was suspended for sometime.

“Bejoy, look in the drawer for the matchsticks.” Bhagat Singh called out as he picked up the hastily abandoned notebooks from the floor.

“Ranjit!” Azad’s impatient groan addressed him. “Names?”

“Sorry, I meant- *Bacchu* look in the drawer for the matchsticks”- Bhagat Singh corrected his mistake. In these months he had got only as far as accepting Ranjit as his name- but it still required a lot of conscious effort to address each other with their ‘party’ names- especially when they were in the security of their hideout. But Azad always discouraged any letting down of the guard.

Sukhdev passed by Bhagat, giving him a friendly slap on his back. “That makes your count- 5.” This was the latest game they were playing- the number of times one makes a mistake with names.

Just then there was a knock on the door. A familiar coded knock. But this was never enough to open the door, hence they waited for the intruder to call out to them. Azad had instinctively clutched at his revolver, but Rajguru’s familiar voice from across the door loosened his grip.

“It’s me- Raghunath, and I have brought the guest with me”.

They had got so immersed in the activities this morning that they had until now forgotten about this ‘guest’ they had summoned. A young, second year student of Chemistry from Allahabad- Lalit Kumar Mukherjee. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and some of the other members had met him a few times in Allahabad and were very impressed by him. He was a fiery speaker- who spoke at length about the need for revolution and armed action- provoking the cowardly youth of the nation to take part in the movement. He was aggressive, passionate and it appeared as if he possessed the same revolutionary fire that had ignited the hearts of the men who were now receiving him. They felt that his being a Chemistry student would help in their endeavour of bomb making. Hence, they had called for Lalit to make him a part of the ‘Bomb tutorials’.

It was his initiation into the revolutionary party- a mighty solemn affair.

“Come on in, Lalit. Hope you are well.” Bhagat Singh’s friendly voice, accompanied by a warm hug, welcomed him.

Lalit smiled amicably as he looked around the room. All eyes were fixed on him. Members who had not seen him earlier were now scanning him attentively. He was a young, handsome man- well groomed, well dressed and well fed. One glance at his neatly oiled and brushed hair was enough to tell that he had never left home, never faced hardships and that standing at the doors of this hideout was indeed a huge leap of destiny for him. He looked a bit nervous in company of men he had never met earlier, and the lack of clarity about why he was summoned also showed up in the frown his face now wore. But they did not judge him yet for each one of them was once like him- raw and unsure- at the portals of an uncertain journey.

He was still looking around the room…when Sukhdev took the initiative to introduce him to other members.

“This is Master ji, our bomb making Guru.

Jatin da smilingly shook his hands. “Welcome young man!”.

Lalit stared at the yellow and black stains on Jatin da’s hands. He then glanced at the bomb shells beside him- this was the first time he had seen a bomb and his mouth slightly gaped open.

“And this is Chandrashekar Azad”.

Azad stood up to greet the man putting his revolver on the table with a thud. Lalit’s eyes remained affixed on the revolver, even when Azad warmly shook hands with him. He then snapped back to awareness and was his courteous self again- but the sweat on his forehead now trickled down his face. He attempted to smile, but his lips merely twitched into some sort of a grin.

And now for the first time, awkward glances started being exchanged amongst the boys who witnessed this scene. From their own personal experience and the experience of seeing other new recruits meet Azad- they just knew that something was amiss. This was just not the way an aspiring revolutionary met Azad for the first time. The eyes that ought to have been lit up in happiness, in awe, in gratitude at being given the opportunity of being initiated into the party were rather blank and indifferent here. Most importantly, these eyes were distracted and scared. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Bejoy looked at each other in slight apprehension. They were the ones who had convinced Azad to allow Lalit into the party- and now their own convictions were faltering.

Azad had also perceived all that was going around him, but he was not going to make a hasty conclusion. He asked for some tea and snacks to be arranged- and that put everyone at ease for sometime.

Lalit had a hard time gulping the food down. He knew he had bitten more than what he could chew. His mind was racing back to the time when he had met Bhagat Singh and his friends in his hostel room at Allahabad. Lalit was a leader of some sort of a youth organisation in his

college and was known as a good orator. It was anyway in his nature to be imposing and boisterous- and hence the need to feel superior…the desire to impress his guests had seized him then. Thus, he gave a long and passionate speech about patriotism and revolution. He had found a worthy audience for a change, as these men were not passive listeners. They chirped in their own opinions too for they were as well read as he was. So there was a debate, an exchange of ideas that made it an intellectually stimulating evening. He thought he had found men 'like him' and hence professed friendship with this group of educated, intelligent and articulate men. But today, his assessment went for a complete toss. To his surprise, or rather dismay, he found out that these men could not only talk about revolution but also execute their plans!

God! These men were making bombs! He thought to himself with a shudder. His head was already reeling in the presence of the revolver that lay on the table. The thought that this was not an armchair revolution anymore churned his stomach. The gravity of the situation was now beginning to emerge- and he did not have to struggle much with his conscience. For he got a clear mandate- he needs to escape from this place at the earliest.

So as soon as tea was over, he crawled up to a corner and groaned as if in pain. Everyone panicked and attended to him. But he refused to tell anything other than-

"I am not feeling well, I need to go back home".

The boys still fussed around him for some more time, but Azad sat on the chair with a heavy sigh- all doubts were confirmed now. He could still hear Bhagat Singh's concerned but helpless voice: "But at least tell us what the ailment is?" Azad turned his head away in disgust. He knew it was a futile question. They all very well understood this ailment.

And they were in a grave situation.

*

The members of the Central Committee sat in a huddle to discuss the matter. They knew they had landed in a mess with this guest.

Jatin da broke the silence by bluntly stating, “He should not have been called here.” Some eyes glanced at the men responsible and Bhagat Singh bit his lips with his head drooping. He knew it was an error of judgement on his part.

Jatin da continued: “This man will betray us at the first opportunity. All our plans have been doomed. He has seen the bomb factory in action- it is highly unsafe to let him go now.” The other members contemplated this in silence. It was true that they could not let him go off now in this manner- after showing him their bomb factory…making him meet Jatin da and Azad…!

And then Sukhdev uttered what only he could have dared to say, “There is just one way out. We can lead him up to the river banks in the night and shoot him.”

A chilling tremor went down the spines of each man present there.

“Have you lost your mind?” Bhagat Singh’s charged voice pierced the silence.

“What alternative do you have? We send him back…with what… a ‘solemn promise’ that he will keep his mouth shut?”

“But…”

“It is supposed to be our duty to protect our organisation…*at any cost*. This is not the time for engaging in sentimentality. The cause of revolution cannot be served if we do not have the courage to take tough decisions. Shooting a coward cannot be wrong.”

“But he is not being killed for his cowardice! There are thousands of cowards- much worse than him- roaming on the streets…we don’t go about shooting them. This man’s only fault is that WE made a foolish mistake of *choosing* him to be a part of our journey.”

“So now we correct that mistake by making another foolish mistake of letting him go?” And again there was that deafening silence- only the sound of heavy breathing filled the room. The evening sun now cast a warm glow upon each of their faces- as if trying to illuminate their entangled thoughts.

No one knew how to deal with what they had just been presented with- even the man who proposed it- Sukhdev- now looked unsure.

Bhagat felt his head throbbing as he slowly sank near the wall. To even imagine what was proposed here was outrageous. A young man had left his house at their command- and now they would deceive him…take him slyly to a river bank and shoot him…dispose off his body somewhere in secrecy of the night while his family would be left to deal with a maddening mystery of his sudden disappearance. And they would come back to their safe hideout, learn how to make bombs, write manifestos, make new slogans and herald a revolution? Things looked so absurd now! He felt completely unhinged, more so because he knew Sukhdev was also not completely wrong. The revolution demanded sacrifices, but…things were not making any sense anymore. He shut his eyes tightly and held his head in between his knees. The day that started off as a dream was turning into a nightmare now.

The room was beginning to feel suffocating with a curious aroma that was a blend of the smell of incense sticks with that of explosives. Bejoy walked up to widen the window shutters. A fresh gust of wind blew past his face- it was certainly the most pleasant corner any man in that room could find for himself at that moment. He stared at the lane beneath- noisy men were returning from work. This mundane, mediocre life -these ordinary men with their ordinary dreams and fears usually evoked repulsion in him. Today he felt a slight tinge of envy at the normalcy of their lives- these men whose evening schedule did not involve a discussion about killing a man by the riverside.

The only person who fared slightly better than all the other men in that room was Jatin da. Of course, he was aware of the issue and the gravity of the moment- but somehow this did not feel like *his* dilemma. He had only recently met all these faces that were lost in their thoughts. Until a week ago, most of them were strangers to him. He was only gradually forming a bond with this group of men- hence, he was still an 'outsider'- a guest who was to leave in a week. This unique problem did add some more depth in their association for they were now together at this crossroad- rising and sinking in this ebb of a poignant turn of revolution. But he sat in the room, more like an observant guest who was now discovering the dynamics of his host. And the first thing which struck him as he turned his gaze from one thoughtful face to another- was that these were very…very young men! The boyish charm…that impeccable innocence that lined up the now dark, brooding faces was heart rending.

And then he looked at Azad. He sat still- in the same inclined posture on the table- with one hand on the arm of the chair and the other resting on the table top. It was very difficult to read his face- but from the rapid breathing, it could be surmised that Azad was racing with his thoughts. Jatin da was very curious about Azad from the moment he heard of him. He had closely seen the leaders of revolutionary parties, and worked with some stalwarts already- most of them had this air of superiority- of accomplishment- if not anything at least educational qualification made them feel confident of their position. But here was a rustic man who was effortlessly leading this group of 'ideologues' who were so unlike him in all matters- education, social standing, temperaments. He had been very intrigued about this aspect of the group- but the scene that followed- cleared all his doubts. A series of almost staccato like sentences that weaved a conversation revealed to him-what Azad was- and what he embodied.

As Azad cleared his throat to begin speaking- a feeling of anticipation gripped each one in the room. For now there was a hope of resolution- as now finally spoke the man who had in him the ability to do the most difficult thing- make a decision.

“Ranjit,…this friend of yours…Lalit… do you think he will head straight to the police if we let him go?” Azad enquired in a businesslike tone.

Bhagat was slightly surprised to find that his judgement still mattered after this fiasco- and he paused for a moment as he carefully worked out the scenario in his mind.

“No, there is no ill-will or malice here- only cowardice. He will not *deliberately* go to the police and give us in.” He looked at Sukhdev for confirmation and saw that he concurred. Jatin da noted that a moment ago they were almost at each other’s collars- and now they made the seamless transition to being the ‘infamous twins’ that they were.

“But if he is *arrested*- will he betray us?” Azad shot again.

“That is possible. He may not last even a preliminary police interrogation.”

“How long will it be necessary to learn bomb making skills?” Azad turned to Jatin da.

“I need at least 2-3 more days. Plus, you need to test the bombs before I leave Agra.” Jatin da observed that the room lapsed back into the uncertain silence with his reply. But Bhagat Singh decided to finally end this unbearable suspense now. He walked up to Azad and stood before him. Azad gazed up as if caught unaware.

With a clenched fist Bhagat Singh uttered the words with some strain-

“Pandit ji, what is your final decision?”.

All eyes in the room were now upon this duo.

Jatin da found himself leaning forward and closely peering into Bhagat's eyes- there was fear, dread and apprehension in them as he awaited Azad's reply. But in them was also a sense of absolute trust- a reflexive obedience which made it evident that although he prayed with all his heart that things should never come to that but if Azad asked him to indeed execute the man- *he would.* Jatin da knew that soldiers place their lives in the hands of their commander- here a man surrendered to his leader- something much greater than his life. *His conscience.* Jatin da silently gazed in awe at Azad- for he could not imagine the burden that lay with him at that moment.

But Azad was unfazed, "We will keep him here until our work is finished. After Jatin da departs, we shall clear up this place and move somewhere else. We will let him go then- for there is no danger for us even if he reveals our hideout."

In a moment, things were resolved. It looked so simple now. Ridiculously simple! Finally, people began to breathe normally.

"And there is no need to engage with him about this. For God's sake do not pick up a fight with him." Azad did not mention any specific names- but he shot a quick glance at the people for whom the instruction was meant.

Sukhdev and Bhagat blinked innocently as if they were oblivious of the insinuation.

"Keep him locked in the room upstairs and get him some food." Azad continued, "Ab mehman bula hi liya hain to mehman nawazi bhi kar liya jaye."

In a flash- the atmosphere lightened up with their laughter, which began tentatively but soon got a strong hold, the moment Bejoy sarcastically asked, "Should we get him some medicines as well…after all he is…ah…'sick'?"

Of course, they gradually began to see the humour in the situation yet each man that left the meeting knew that he had been rattled out of his depths in the last few minutes. For they had stood once again before the brutal face of duty…the grim, dark visage of revolution. For as Yeats had said, it indeed is a *terrible beauty*.

Lalit Kumar Mukerjee's nervousness at seeing the weapons, ammunition and bomb-making apparatus aroused suspicion among his comrades, and the Agra centre was eventually closed and shifted to Saharanpur. The suspicion proved tragically well founded: Mukerjee later became an approver for the prosecution in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, giving evidence against his former comrades.

A bittersweet tussle

The decision to send Bhagat Singh to the Central Legislative Assembly was not an easy one for the HSRA. When the Central Committee first discussed the proposed action, Bhagat Singh himself offered to go, but the proposal was rejected. The leadership feared that, already wanted in the Saunders case, his arrest would deprive the organisation of one of its most important leaders. Chandra Shekhar Azad was particularly reluctant to risk losing him. Sukhdev, who had been absent from the original meeting, strongly disagreed when he learned of the decision. Convinced that Bhagat Singh was the only man capable of explaining the revolutionary philosophy in court after the action, he confronted his closest friend. Their disagreement became heated, with Sukhdev even accusing Bhagat Singh of shrinking from death.

They both stood with their fists clenched. The last remnant of the high decibel argument had dissolved in the air leaving behind an eerie silence. A group of boys stood far from them, their eyes widened with wonder and disbelief. One of them feared that a violent fight was about to begin and rushed out to call Azad. As soon as he had taken a few strides, he realised that he was slightly overreacting but then convinced himself, muttering, “Who knows what unpredictable circumstances can spring up when in company of such men!”

Meanwhile Sukhdev calmly uttered while Bhagat stared at him with a shocked beyond belief look: “Don’t give me excuses about why you cannot go for the assembly bomb action- ‘central committee did not agree’, ‘I am too valuable a member’—when the truth perhaps is that you are getting caught up in the charms of life and don’t want to part with it any longer. He could not help pausing abruptly when he saw Bhagat’s trembling face that was trying to fight back tears and then continued-

“I know I am being harsh but I am only doing my duty towards a friend. If today you stand back and allow others to go and die- history will judge you as a coward.”

“Don’t you ever talk to me again.” Bhagat Singh spoke almost through his teeth and stormed out of the scene.

He banged straight into Azad who had just entered the room with a bewildered expression.

“What’s happening here?” He hardly finished his sentence when he was interrupted by Bhagat.

“Please call for a committee meeting again. I propose I be sent for the Assembly Bomb action. And I will not budge this time.”

“Now look here, Ranjit…” Azad held on to his arm as he tried to placate him while looking around distractedly as if searching for a clue to figure out what had taken place in the room that brought them back to this cursed discussion again.

But Bhagat Singh jerked his hand out of Azad’s grip and walked out…

The next day, in a tense meeting, amidst murmurs and roars- Bhagat Singh sealed his fate. Sukhdev’s eyes remained fixed on the floor all throughout the meeting at the end of which he quietly rose and left the room. Bhagat heard the door closing behind him but chose to remain aloof. Azad noted it from the corner of his eyes but kept silent.

That night, Bhagat lay alone in his mat recalling Sukhdev’s words. They still aroused anger and hurt. Afterall, it was a scathing attack- he had questioned his courage, resolve, character, integrity…made unimaginable accusations…confronted him in a manner no one but he could have dared to. He knew he would not be able to forgive this for a long time.

And just then, from a remote corner in a room he could hear a group of their comrades talking in a huddle. Of course, the unprecedented

‘Sukhdev-Bhagat’ fight was bound to be the topic of discussion for sometime.

“Sukhdev is jealous, you know…”

“That is why he wanted to send him away…”

“To take his place?”

“Of course. Did you hear the scandalous things he told him during the fight?. Anyone would get provoked!”

“What a shrewd way to get this done! And we all thought they were best friends…” Bhagat found himself instantly stiffening- and in a flash of a moment his seething anger gave way to an instinctive urge of *defending* him. He leapt out of the bed for a confrontation- but saw that Azad was already chiding them for indulging in idle gossip. Azad then turned towards him, catching him in that awkward aggressive position. Bhagat tried to wriggle out of it by saying that he was up to take water.

Azad gulped his knowing smile as he lay on his mat, muttering, “Will not speak to him and cannot hear a word against him!”

Bejoy, who had not been getting along very well with Sukhdev in recent times, met Bhagat’s eyes when he was settling down to sleep. Bejoy had been the staunchest voice opposing Sukhdev’s idea about sending him- and hence Bhagat was really touched to see Bejoy put aside his differences and calmly utter: “Don’t bother about them. Sukhdev has a lot of faults, but *this* is not one of them.”

Well, he knew this. But then, the midnight event had clarified a lot of other things for Bhagat. One- that all his resentment was transient indulgences, they did not possess any emotional longevity. Second- It took a lot of courage to send your friend to the gallows. Third- It was his friend’s implicit faith in his ability to do this job well that impelled him to provoke, even at the risk of being misunderstood for eternity. Fourth- even if a lot of unwarranted words had been spoken, their friendship should have been adept in accommodating them. And the fifth and most

terrifying one- they may have seen the last of each other today.

He sat up with a jerk.

It was not as if the close knit group of theirs never had squabbles earlier. When men possessing such a definite individual streak and unique personality lived under a roof- it was natural that they had their own share of endearing tiffs and childish spats. But they lived by an unwritten rule- Fight to your heart's content- but be sure to make up before you walk out of the house. Never leave things unsaid and tasks undone when you are living a life of such uncertainty. The thought that so many years of such intimate companionship would end up with a parting on this note kept him awake the whole night.

Sukhdev and he- they had an equation that he shared with no one else- even though he found very intimate companions during his journey. With him- they were friends who became revolutionaries and *not* the other way around.

Both of them were together at a time when the revolvers had not replaced the pens in their hands, when they sat together in the night cramming exam lessons and not bomb-formulas, when planning classroom pranks were called 'strategic meetings', when feeding intoxicated snacks to unsuspecting victims was their concept of 'conspiracy' and having a first cigarette was their definition of 'risky action'. He could not help smiling as he recalled their past together- no matter how hard they pretended to be 'professional revolutionaries' they were still the same young hot headed boys who could indulge in a fist fight over an interpretation of a novel. He wished he had done just that to end this argument—punched him and then hugged him. But he had instead uttered—'Don't ever talk to me again', words which now wrung his very insides out. He tried to get some sleep but kept tossing as his mind was occupied with the alarming possibility: "What if Sukhdev and Fate decided to actually comply with this request?" But a week later,

when he saw Sukhdev arrive unannounced at their hideout in spite of Azad's strict instructions of evacuating Delhi- he knew that he should have estimated Sukhdev better. He was really beyond complying to anything.

And while he was still recovering from the shock of his sudden visit, Sukhdev, with that characteristic nonchalant shrug, walked up to him and placed a book on the table.

"You were looking for this book last year," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Shastri has sent it for you."

Bhagat threw a distracted glance at the book and then looked at him again in bewilderment. This was certainly not the first word he expected to hear from him after that bitter fight. Shiv and Battuk stood at a distance, both trying to restrain their smiles. The absolute absence of any histrionics in Sukhdev was a perennial source of amusement for all of them. And their hope of a dramatic reconciliation was now to be abandoned.

By his stoic standards, Sukhdev had had a volatile 7 days, beginning from that train journey from Delhi to Lahore where he experienced a deafening chaos raging in his mind. *(Appendix A)* Mental clarity was his biggest strength, but for the first time his equilibrium had been disbalanced. For on one hand was the leader of a revolutionary conspiracy who had just won the possibility of a successful attack on the enemy and on the other was a man who had staked and lost his only friend. The jubilance of the first did not seem enough to engulf the despair of the second. He shifted restlessly in his seat. It was only a few minutes since they parted and yet life without Bhagat was already impossible to even imagine. How would he actually *live* it. And for the first time in his life, Sukhdev felt an urge to weep, an emotion that scared him to his depths. He fought hard against it- and with a taut jaw and trembling face, he managed to overcome it. A part of him knew that

someday he would give in. But it was not today. Not yet. He chided himself for indulging in this sentimentality- in light of the cause they had sworn to serve, their friendship was too trivial a thing to mourn about.

And so, with such strong and steely barricades around him he managed to survive the next few days. There was no dearth of work in Lahore, a new center was to be set up, bomb-making shells had to be acquired, a network with the journalists was to be established for propaganda post the action. All of these would have been successful in keeping him distracted if only it was not in Lahore that they had to be executed. Anywhere, but Lahore. For each street, each lane, each shop here had some memory associated with Bhagat…a memory of their innocence and their insolence- a memory of smiles and tears, a memory of heartwarming togetherness. And as he walked alone in the alleys of a crowded Anarkali Bazaar with his eyes blank and unfocused as some familiar and some unknown faces passed by him- he was gripped by a frightening sense of loneliness. As if he suddenly found himself to be an outcast- someone who never belonged here. Perhaps he never belonged anywhere without Bhagat. And thus, when Shastri, their old librarian friend, called out to him- it felt as if his voice was a faint echo coming from a faraway place.

“Bhai Sukhdev! Stop a while!” Shastri came panting up to him. “I have been calling you for so long! He finally caught up with his breath.

Sukhdev, a bit disoriented but quick to jump to his guard against any display of vulnerability, gave him a courteous smile.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you.” And then he abruptly stopped because he was beginning to hear something else. It was Bhagat’s infectious laugh that echoed from somewhere the moment he gazed at Shastri’s face. This was the man both of them had troubled incessantly-with whom they had shared some rare light moments filled with endearing jokes and pranks.

“You have been out of here for sometime?” Shastri’s tone indicated that he was repeating his question.

“Ah…yes…yes… we have been busy.”

“I knew it, for it is impossible for the two of you to be missing from the library for so long.” He looked around for Bhagat before asking, “Where is that prankster?” It was just so unusual to not find him beside Sukhdev.

Sukhdev’s smile began to wear off but his voice was still sturdy.

“He is…not in town.”

Shastri knew of their involvement in revolutionary activities, and hence partly guessed the cause of the evasive reply.

“Tell him that the Bakunin book for which he created an uproar last December”,- he paused to chuckle as he recalled the exaggerated fight they had. “I have managed to get a copy of it in the library. He can borrow it the next time he is here.”

Sukhdev felt an instant hollowness in his chest as he uttered: “He will…not be back.” Shastri shot a puzzled look-“Not be back?”

Sukhdev’s glassy eyes revealed the implication of the utterance. His heart sank but he knew that the rules of the party would not allow Sukhdev to reveal anything more.

Sukhdev briskly saluted him and walked past him, indicating an end of the conversation. Shastri had taken a few steps ahead when Sukhdev turned behind and called out to him as if on an afterthought.

“I can take the book to him-- if you lend it to me. But I do not guarantee its timely return or a return at all.”

Shastri paused to consider. He was very strict with the rules of the library but something compelled him to utter-

“Come at 9 a.m. tomorrow to take the book.”

And thus, this book became the olive branch that now lay on the table as two men shared a long stare between each other.

Bhagat knew that he was no longer angry nor sulking but he did expect from Sukhdev some sort of a justification and hence he gazed at his friend with hurt eyes. But the lack of any *guilt* in Sukhdev's eyes was rendering his accusatory look completely void. Those deep black earnest and sparkling eyes stared back at him with not a trace of hesitation or apprehension in them- as if there was NOTHING to regret, to apologise, to explain. There was just a LOT to convey- the fact that he was in pain at the thought of a final parting with a friend who he knew he had deeply hurt, the fact that he was having difficulty living with the burden of his absence, the fact that he had disobeyed all orders just so that he could see for one last time that familiar smile which lit up his friend's face whenever a new book presented itself to him. And since Sukhdev was hopelessly poor with words- his friend had to read all of these in his eyes.

One split second- and Bhagat moved forward and embraced him amidst faint cheers from the others.

That night, the two friends lay beside each other musing on the strange contradiction they faced as neither knew if this reconciliation made the impending separation easier or even more unbearable…

When Bhagat woke up the next day he was disappointed to hear that Sukhdev had left for Lahore in the early hours of the morning without waking anyone up. But he knew this was expected- the duties of an underground party organiser like Sukhdev did not allow him to take the luxury of prolonging a surprise visit. And his own duties did not allow him to lament about the lost opportunity to say a final goodbye to Sukhdev for he had more pressing issues to take care of- getting the press photographs, printing of pamphlets and inspection of the Assembly Hall.

Yet, he could not get rid of the restlessness which was disturbing him in bouts amidst the frenzy of activities. The fight with his friend had

ended but the argument had not. He felt he was deprived of an opportunity to explain his viewpoint- to challenge Sukhdev's—to argue-discuss-to just basically have a frank conversation with him in solitude. And thus, after tossing and turning and sighing and fidgeting-he decided to write a letter to voice his side of the issue they had fought over. *(Appendix B)* Battuk was not in the least bit surprised when he saw his friend at the makeshift desk in the middle of the night busy writing and taking long thoughtful pauses in between. Shiv was also not at all surprised when Bhagat handed him the letter to be delivered to Sukhdev when he reached Lahore. He shared a knowing smile with Battuk for they had been expecting this. It was a standing joke in the inner circle of the party that the sky could fall and safety be jeopardised, and discipline be broken and life be endangered but an ARGUMENT between Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev could NEVER be left incomplete. All men who had even remotely known them could testify that even if the circumstances demanded an abrupt end of a discussion- days- weeks-months later- the discussion would be picked up from exactly where it was left and laboriously argued till at least one of them gave in. Or in unexpected circumstances such as the incident at Gwalior where Sukhdev and Bhagat Singh, throwing all caution to the winds, spent the whole night on the terrace in an animated discussion---in loud and chaste Punjabi which drew everyone's attention- including the night policeman who was naive enough to mistake them for college students and hence just chased them away with a warning. When his superior had voiced doubts about them being revolutionaries, he had confidently defended his actions, "Sir, do men with guns and bombs ever TALK so much?" Shiv smiled to himself recalling that incident and then carefully looked at the sealed letter in his hand. This was a first- never before had their argument been continued over a letter- but then never before had they parted for life either.

At that point- neither the one who wrote the letter, nor the one who was delivering it-nor the one who was receiving it could even imagine the strange fate the letter where morality and love and life and attachments was so frankly discussed would soon have to bear.

For who could have imagined that Sukhdev- the most vocal adherent of discipline and the need to keep a reign over emotions would be unable to bring himself to destroy a parting letter from his friend, enabling the police to recover it during his arrest.

Who could have imagined that this intimate letter—with all its spelling errors and informal tone and personal confessions and vulnerable admissions would one day be examined by a handwriting expert with a magnifying glass while a hoarse baritone voice would impassively read out its contents in a courtroom filled with friends, enemies and strangers. Who could have imagined the public display of the letter would one day fill its author with not just embarrassment but a sense of VIOLATION since the letter came from a space that that did not belong to the party, the revolution or even the annals of history and was not to be intruded upon by that curious reporter or that grinning typist or that peering magistrate himself! Who could have imagined that a harmless letter would one day be used to establish Sukhdev's involvement in the Assembly bomb action- and his role as Bhagat Singh's equal in command in the conspiracy- paving the way for his death sentence. *(Appendix C)* For who could have imagined the strange ways in which destiny affirms itself.

A Breath of Air

In the days leading up to the Assembly Bomb Action of 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh stayed in Delhi with his comrades Shiv Verma and Jai Dev Kapoor, while Batukeshwar Dutt was brought into the city for the final preparations. Verma and Kapoor, who were already familiar with the Assembly and had made the necessary arrangements, helped prepare the ground for the action. The plan was carefully conceived not as an attempt to kill, but to make the revolutionary message heard: Bhagat Singh and Dutt would throw bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly, scatter their leaflets, raise the cry of "Inquilab Zindabad!", and deliberately surrender rather than escape. On 8 April, they carried out the plan, turning the Assembly into a dramatic platform for the revolutionary cause.

Delhi, 7th April, 1929.

It was half past 12. The punctual midnight orchestra had just begun with the cricket, the owl and a ticking watch. Occasional thunders chipped in to compensate for the rather one note musical piece. The moon, the stars and the breeze were the loyal unobtrusive audience to the symphony.

In an airy room of a low roofed building, four men were catching up on sleep after a day of massive activity and planning. After all, an attempt to bomb the Assembly House demanded their toil. On the only piece of furniture in that room, lay pink pamphlets that were to be scattered after the action the next morning. Writing and printing them was one of the most challenging feat they had achieved on the eve of the D-day. The excitement had kept them awake for a long time, but the body demanded sleep- and though all of them professed to spend each moment of this short lived night in revelry, soon, each one of them dozed off. For two of them- it was their last night as free men.

It must have been half past midnight that Shiv woke with a start. He looked around in sleepy daze as he trying to figure out the cause of his disturbance. It was the cursed rat once again. This was the fifth night when he was woken by rats who had the uncanny ability to exclusively disturb him. He was irritated but too tired to pursue his tormentor, so he was about to dim the lantern and go back to sleep when his attention drifted to his friend's bed. He frowned in suspicion.

Bhagat was frantically tossing and turning in his sleep. He violently threw off his blanket and was undoing the topmost button of his shirt while still in deep sleep. In the dim light of the lantern- Shiv could discern the beads of sweat on his grimacing face. He looked around confused for the night was quite pleasant. And next, he heard him gasp for air. By now, Battuk who was sleeping on a mat in the other corner also woke up. He met Shiv's enquiring look with an equally concerned face. Both friends looked at each other and then the sleeping man in turns. Bhagat's hand movements had now begun to get frantic- he held his own collar and was trying to pull it away from himself.

"Sardar?" Shiv gently touched his arm.

Bhagat Singh opened his eyes wide and sat up on the bed. He was still breathing heavily but seeing the concerned faces of his two friends he tried to speak casually-

"It's nothing, I am just a bit suffocated in here…" He could not complete his sentence as he was already choking and coughing. Battuk sprang to his feet to get water but saw that Bhagat had made a frantic dart towards the window and flung it apart letting a gush of spring breeze into the room. Like a drowning man, he gulped in the air in rhythmic bouts of heavy breathing. The fourth man in the room- Jaidev- now finally woke up with the noise of the window shutters banging. He found two of his friends frozen to the spot while the third friend was inhaling air by the window. In the middle of the night?!

“What has happened?” he asked in a sleepy tone.

No one answered. All eyes remained fixed on the standing figure whose hair was now dancing to the tune of the soothing wind.

Bhagat Singh felt a smile curling up as a few drops of rain scattered on his face that was held upwards towards the sky. It felt heavenly. He shut his eyes tight and was lost in that sublime moment of the night for a while. He then slowly opened his eyes and looked at the stars and the treetops, mesmerized by their captivating beauty until his gaze registered the unfamiliar dome of a mosque across the street. He instantly snapped back to reality. This was Delhi. This was the eve of the Assembly Hall action where they were to court arrest. And this was his last night under a starry sky.

His back stiffened and he almost held his breath as a gnawing feeling enveloped him. He knew that he had scared the wits out of his poor clueless friends who had never seen him indulge in such midnight antics. Thus, he took one final breath of air and plastered a smile on his face as he turned to face his companions again.

“I think it was the heavy feast we had for dinner. I was feeling uneasy in the chest.” He saw that none looked too convinced.

“And I think the room is a bit small, isn’t it? I just felt a bit stifled…” He again could not complete the sentence because he recognized the look of pain and alarm that momentarily flashed in the eyes of his friends at this utterance. He bit his upper lip. A man going to prison the next day should NOT have had an attack of claustrophobia on the previous night. And the least he could do was not speak about it!

“Fellows, I am really fine. Let’s go back to sleep.”

The silence in the room was getting awkward by the minute. But no words could express what each of them felt and hence, after a while Shiv decided to dim the lantern and gestured at Jaidev, who was already swaying, to go back to sleep.

He thought the two men who were going to embark on a journey the next day deserved some privacy to sort this out for themselves.

Battuk passed the glass of water that he had been long holding to Sardar as the latter settled on his bed. Their eyes met and the gaze was immediately averted.

Bhagat lay his flaming head down on the pillow and realised that Battuk still sat by his bed waiting for him to fall asleep.

He reached out for his hand and comforted him.

"Go to sleep, I am fine. We have to get up early tomorrow."

"I know." Battuk hesitated, then patted his forehead tenderly. "What was it?"

Bhagat looked away as he paused to contemplate and then decided to be frank.

"I don't know. I just felt as if I have been confined to a dark room where I cannot breathe…I was in chains…and…" He did not want to continue but those loving eyes that peered at him made him vulnerable enough to confess, "And… I felt as if… a noose tightened over my neck." Battuk flinched in reflex and fought back tears.

But Shiv, whose face lay buried in the dark allowed a trickle to flow by and wet his pillow. He did not know if it was grief or empathy or fear that caused the lump in his throat. Bhagat ran his fingers through his own hair and let out an embarrassed laugh. "Forget it, we have a busy day ahead." His speech slightly slurred with heavy sleep falling over him. And soon, he was lost in dreams once again while Battuk sat leaning against the wall silently watching him regain his calm repose. He felt as if he was familiar with each twitch of the face, each curve that lined up his forehead- and seeing his creased brows slowly becoming untensed- he knew that bright and fair dreams were back in the horizon. He did not have to guess much about the nature of *this* dream. He knew all about the singular dream that throbbed in each of their hearts. It was only the

nightmares that were slowly emerging. His eyes wandered aimlessly around the room before fixing it on the patch of cloudy sky visible through the open window. The blank dark sky mirrored the fears and uncertainty that shrouded their minds. No matter how meticulously each of them had planned and plotted- the truth was- no one could be prepared for what they were walking into. For none knew what lay ahead of them. And seeing the man who was the most enthusiastic of them all, the most jubilant about this journey- who had fought so hard to be allowed to undertake it- also buckle under the weight of the dread and gloom invoked in him the unutterable question- Are we doing the right thing? And in response, almost instantly- a surge of emotions swelling from within engulfed him and he felt as if each fibre of his being knew with certitude that the dawn that was soon to break on the firmament would bring with it an unforeseen victory, an unimaginable glory. It shall set things in motion and before the eyes of bewildered world would unfold a tale unlike any it had ever seen. It would be a perilous journey- filled with tears and pain and darkness-, but it will be momentous- *it will be immortal*.

Some historic words would be spoken, some indomitable decisions would be taken- some eternal legends will be born, some new heroes would be forged out of obscure men- a destiny would be scripted. This is what history would record. The world would never know of the nightmare that their hero had lived on the eve of the plunge. Perhaps, Bhagat himself would soon forget this. But would they ever forget the sight of a man blindly running towards the window for nothing but just a breath of air as if his life depended on it? But then, what is life if not a breath of air? And only one question haunted all the men sleeping in the room on that heartbreaking night. Where would the soon to be entombed men find their window the next evening? And every evening thereafter…

A Revolutionary's Father

It was their first meeting after the sentence had been pronounced. It turned out to be the most tumultuous one. A father had done something that was beyond his son's imagination and comprehension- he had sent a mercy appeal to the British Court! After a rather dramatic showdown with him he had finally agreed to retract the appeal. But with that move- the realisation that this battle was over and his son's end near- devastatingly struck him. He sat with a thud just outside Bhagat Singh's cell. The long due breakdown was now finally occurring while his son looked on helplessly.

His father's old friend stood consoling the weeping man.

"Kya Kar Rahe Ho Sardar sahaab? Does this behove a man like you? The son you are mourning for…wasn't it you who taught him to walk this path? We have all seen how you brought up this boy…to become your *Shera Puttar*."

The word evoked an old buried childhood memory in his son.

"Go on, Bhagat, a few more steps!"

The father's encouraging voice could be heard from their bedroom. He had instructed a five year old boy to go and latch the main door. In the dark.

Each day the boy went up to a point in the courtyard and ran back terrified of the night. Each day the father prodded that he go at least further than his last mark.

And one day, the boy finally came back after latching the door to meet the father's glowing face brimming with satisfaction and overwhelming pride as he cuddled him in his arms saying- Oh Bhagatya!

My *Shera Puttar*! He snapped back to the present. His father was staring at him with an unblinking gaze which had a tinge of recognition as if he too had caught onto this exact strain of memory. The old man held his friend's hand and slowly got to his feet, brushing his coat and composing himself he said-

"You are right, Mehta. I have not forgotten my lessons- ***It is just that the bounds of his courage now exceed the definition of mine."*** And with that one sentence a long standing mystery was solved.

It has been more than a year since Bhagat Singh was struggling to reconcile with this aspect of his father's attitude- this curious mix of abhorrent weakness and pardonable love. He often heard this constant refrain from his friends trying to console him: "Be patient with him, this is how any father would behave".

That was exactly his problem. This is how ANY father would behave. But he was not supposed to be 'any' father. He was a man who had lost two of his brothers in this struggle and had himself endured the hardships of the prison. He was a freedom fighter after all! And it was very hard to accept that all his noble intentions and faculties became dysfunctional the moment it concerned his son's life. And a display of this infirmity caused a huge blow to the morale of his son who had grown up idolizing the man who was now betraying his own teachings. But today, after hearing him, Bhagat felt as if he understood his father- he still could not condone him- but a comprehension was achieved at last. It provided him the long sought solace that his father's stance did not amount to insincerity or hypocrisy. It was just that between absolute valour and sheer cowardice- there could exist a category of—'courage with limits'. He noticed that this father had come very close to the rails while he was lost in his thoughts. And then to his surprise, he saw a smile on his father's face. It was a peculiar kind—a sportsman like smile that flashes when one gracefully concedes defeat. Today, when he stood

before a condemned cell for what may be an “Aakhri Mulakat” session with his son- he realised who had won the final round of the game they had been playing with Fate for many years. And the winner too knew that the time for a closure of a lifelong rift had come.

“I apologise for some of those letters *(Appendix D)*… I know they have hurt you.” Bhagat at last found his voice.

“They did. But I will cherish them for life.” He extended his hands through the rail and lovingly ruffled up his son’s hair.

There were very little words…just long stares between them as if the eyes would convey much more than the tongue ever could.

Till a moment ago, Bhagat was acutely self-aware- he knew the eyes of the guards who were watching him, he could see the other prisoners also strain their necks to catch a glimpse of this meeting, his father’s friend also stood at a distance- he even saw the few pigeons in the courtyard who appeared to be fairly interested in this scene. Hence, he was extremely self-conscious and quite embarrassed at his father’s breakdown. But now in a flash, all of this receded in oblivion…the rails…the prison…the audience…it felt as if he was all alone with a man who he had also loved as dearly as a son could. He felt the warmth of a tear developing in his eyes, but he did not make the effort to wipe it off as if he consented to make a display of his vulnerability for a change. He just soaked in the moment- a heartbreakingly fragile moment that was soon going to dissolve out of existence.

After what may have been an eternity, he finally bent down to touch his father’s feet for the last time. All those men who stood around them could feel that there was something so solemn in that moment- something dramatic and yet sublime.

His father lifted his hand to bless him but his words stammered at the spontaneous ‘Jeete raho’. Bhagat looked up and slightly smiled as if he acknowledged his dilemma. These usual forms of blessings no longer

made any sense in a condemned cell.

"God Bless You." He finally muttered touching his son's head for the last time. His father then abruptly turned his face away and was about to leave when he stopped as if he was suddenly reminded of something. He hesitated to speak, but realising that something far too valuable depended on this- he finally spoke up:

"Bhagat, there is one more appeal we can make…"

Bhagat paused for a moment- intensely scanning the nervous yet hopeful face of his father. He could not understand what brought his father back on that hopeless crossroad once again. Feeling unable to say anything, he just moved forward and reached out to his father's hand from across the bars. He warmly held those trembling hands in the cusp of his own hand- and then with all the strength that was he could draw from such a moment- he said in a half-choked but firm voice-

"Ab bas. Ab mujhe jaane dijiye. You will have to let go of me now." And he sharply withdrew his hands and made his way back to the interiors of his cell. The gesture indicated that he had himself terminated the meeting. An elderly British jailer was bound to now lead his father away from the enclosure. On his way out, his father repeatedly kept looking back at the cell- hoping that his son would turn around. But all he could only see a silhouette of a man standing against the sun- just an outline of a shadowy figure facing the wall with his back firmly against the rail.

It was only when he heard the loud bang of the door shutting after his father's departure that Bhagat Singh finally turned as he relaxed his stiffened shoulders and released his tightly clenched hand only to realise that they were red and inflamed as his nails had dug deep into the skin of his palm.

His cell was flanked on either sides by that of his two condemned friends who were a witness to this intimate personal meeting- who had

heard each spoken and unspoken word of it. Privacy was one of the first casualties of a prison system.

Although they could not see how their friend was faring now- the thread the joined these men sharing the same destiny ran deeper than the walls that separated them. And they very well understood this morbid silence that always made its presence felt after each such meeting. And so Sukhdev's cheerful voice called out to him:

"What say, Bhagat! Today Taya ji had no words of rebuke for me?!".

It was bound to bring a smile on Bhagat's face as he recalled how Sukhdev had borne the brunt of most of his father's bouts of violent temper. In his father's eyes he was marked in the classic 'that wayward friend who is spoiling my son' category and Sukhdev quite enjoyed this grossly ill-appropriated status. But even the banter from across the cells could not distract him from the heaviness he felt in his heart. Sunsets and evenings always invoked in him a sense of acute nostalgia. As he saw the slanting rays of the sun receding from his cell and felt the blissful spring breeze slightly ruffle his hair- the memory of a similar spring evening resurfaced and he found himself transported to a familiar corridor in Bradlaugh Hall where his father had caught him and Sukhdev red-handed as they were pasting inflammatory posters on the wall. And he could now hear an echo of his prophetic scolding vividly, as if it was just yesterday that his father was yelling at them-

"If you do not mend your ways, both of you will end up at the gallows someday." And here they were- his two obnoxious defaulters living in adjacent condemned cells at Lahore Central Jail.

They indeed did not mend their ways.

They could not.

Eternal Friendships

—

My Dear Warrior

AZAD

At each crossroad, my feet have swayed.
At each crossroad, he silently waived—
“You are free, as always, to choose your way.”
And at each crossroad,
he remained the choice I could never make.

“Our humble sacrifices shall be only a link in the chain that has very accurately been beautified by […] the glorious death of our dear warrior Azad.”

— Bhagat Singh, in his last petition, 1931

The reluctant approval

It was a heated Central Committee meeting. Sukhdev and I had not yet recovered from the verbal battle we engaged in last night. We avoided each other's eyes, yet the tension in between us could be felt by all members. Adding on to the tense atmosphere was the fact that each one present in the room knew that on the table lay a motion that was to decide all our destinies. Individual and Collective.

The action was no longer in the phase of iterative planning. The point in question was- Who was to throw the bombs in the Assembly House. This was not the first time we were discussing this. But surely it was going to be the last time. And I refused to budge this time. There was no way I was going to allow anyone to snatch this opportunity from me. I reasoned with them, and then pleaded and finally fought. Each one knew it in their hearts that what I was proposing was principally right, it was just the mind that presented argument after each counterargument to evade the inevitable. Finally, they gave in. Exhausted by my theatrics perhaps, they agreed to vote. Out of the seven members of the Central Committee, I got 6 votes in my favour. There was just one vote of dissent. But for me, it established the futility of the entire exercise. For in spite of my victory, I felt as if I lost that round.

Azad said a quiet, firm NO.

He was not in the least likely to overthrow the democratic principles of our party and hence gave permission for the action based on majority opinion. But I still stood defeated. For he had said a NO. And left the table.

The rest of the members stared at each other. There was no scope for jubilance at my victory of course, but an impending farewell did beckon us. I could see some of them trying their best to maintain decorum but their faces betrayed them. All of us knew that I was walking straight to

the gallows. But through our eyes we conveyed our mutual decision to postpone the ceremonious farewell as much work was already pending to be done for the Action.

And so I was left alone with him. He appeared to be nonchalant as he took out the weapons and began polishing them. I did not know how to break in the circle he created around himself. His silence was disturbing me. Finally I decided to attempt-

"I think I would need to carry a revolver too along with the bombs. What do you say?"

"As you decide. Should I call for the committee meeting again?" he said without looking at me. I knew this was not him speaking and I could bear it no longer.

"Pandit ji, don't make it more difficult for me."

"Difficult for you? It is going to be very easy for the rest of us, right? To see you walk to your grave."

He abruptly turned his face away. I was slightly taken aback as I realised I was no longer talking to the Commander-in-Chief of HSRA.

"Pandit ji, this sentimentality…does not help us…" I stammered.

"No, this is not sentimentality. You think I am reluctant to part with you? I am not that novice a revolutionary. I know fully well that any day might be the last for anyone of us- we are bound to part on the way. But to orchestrate a parting…to go and offer yourself to the enemy just to make a statement…these are things I cannot understand. I do not know how you expect me to be a bystander seeing you in the enemy's grip when I have all the means to rescue. Bhagat, let us plan this again. Go if you want, but I will take a motor and be at the gate ensuring your safe escape. I have seen the site, it is possible, you hear me?"

"But you know the heart of this action lies in the fact that we don't escape- we face the trialmake statements- take our fight to a national platform…I can see the splendour in this deed…the grandeur…that will

be diminished if we…"

"And I can foresee how catastrophic your arrest will be. And perilous too."

"For all of us." He added.

I almost choked. He surely did not mean that.

"You trust me, don't you?" I uttered with a lot of difficulty after a pause. "I assure you I will withstand the interrogation…but you can plan the precautionary steps for the safety of our party…and also…"

He waved his hand to make me stop.

"It is not you who I distrust, it is the circumstances. I have experienced this earlier too with the Kakori Conspiracy. Bismil, Ashfaq…one after the other the entire party got dissolved out of existence. We crumbled like a pack of cards. And now with you gone…your arrest would render us…me…vulnerable once again…"

I could feel my body stiffening. It was not as if I had not thought of this prospect, but to hear it in such clear terms was enough to disarm me. He saw me dropping my eyes and silently looking at the floor. A vortex of thoughts, doubts, possibilities encircled me and I was about to kneel down under its weight when I felt his hand on my shoulder. I turned and met his compassionate gaze. There was a tinge of guilt in those eyes too, as if he was apologising for not being by my side at this crucial hour. He had no clue of the abyss in which I was about to plunge myself when he uttered the reassuring-

"Let it be. It is a risk but one that can be taken. None of us know what lies ahead anyway. We have to go by instincts sometimes."

I could feel a sense of relief gripping me. At last, I had Azad's acceptance. I could not say anything except break into a grateful smile for he had pulled me out just in time. He responded with his usual curtness-

"Come, choose the gun."

And in 20 minutes' time, we were back to as normal as the circumstance would permit. Azad was always the happiest when in the presence of his collection of weapons, and I could not help but silently smile at his excited banter about the pistols and bullets and firing range. I recalled the day when he had first placed a revolver in my hand. My hand slightly shook under its weight and he had gripped it from below saying- "Steady." And as he looked into my eyes, I could feel that he conveyed the magnitude of responsibility I had to assume with that object in my hand. And then I chuckled as I remembered all the rebukes I got for missing the mark or not handling the weapon with enough care.

"What is it?" He asked in surprise.

"Nothing, just got reminded of something."

"What?"

"You remember how you yelled at me when you realised I left behind the magazine of the pistol at the Saunder's murder site."

"Ah yes, foolish mistake that one!"

He kept quiet for a moment and then added with a sigh-

"I did not know then that you are capable of much worse- like wanting to leave yourself behind at the site."

My smile vanished in a flash as I saw him standing before me with a faraway gaze.

"Well, then I give you all the right to rebuke me for that too." I added after a pause. I doubt he heard anything for he quietly walked away.

I stood there biting my lips, regretting beginning this conversation.

And now we part…

The next day I woke up to see him preparing for departure.

"You are leaving?"

“Yes, I have to set up centres in other places now. All the rest of us should now move out of Delhi, leaving you and Battuk with Shiv and Jaidev now.”

“Yes, but there is time for it…”

“No. I am required to be at Jhansi now, then to Saharanpur to set up the new bomb factory.” Though this was not untrue, I knew the abrupt departure had a deeper cause.

He deemed it best that we avoid each other’s company which was now filled with unease and a strange kind of tension and anticipation. It was as if he was scared of giving a command forbidding me to go and I scared of obeying it.

“You are leaving by the afternoon train?”

“No. Right now.”

“And then? Will you be back before I…?”

“No.”

“So this is it?”

“Yes.”

I leapt out of my bed in bafflement.

My mind went back to the time when we had first met after he lost all his men in the Kakori Case. Our collaboration could be aptly described as one between a man who had reached a dead end and one who had never begun. He was looking for a way out, I for a way in. He had the zeal, the drive, the skills but no men by his side. I had the dream, the desire, the resolve, but no one to lead. And hence, our meeting led to a culmination for both of us. And it was under Azad that a group of men who were till then only revolutionaries in a library metamorphosed into warriors on the battlefield. Such was the significance and import of our historic meeting. And now it was going to end like this? I hardly out of bed and he packing his bags? I don’t know what pomp or ceremonious farewell I had expected from him, but I certainly didn’t think that he

would announce a final departure so casually.

Shiv walked in that moment and conveyed that the train had been delayed and we have another hour in hand. I almost heaved a sigh of relief. When we had begun working together it appeared as if eternity stretched before us to dream and build and fail and rise together. Now we were scrambling for a few hours of togetherness.

“That is great. I will accompany you to the station then.” I hurriedly started dressing up. Soon I noticed an awkward silence in the room combined with blank stares.

“What?” I asked confused.

“Ah, so now the most wanted man in British India, about to go in for an important action soon, will walk with me out in the open on the streets of Delhi. Fine revolutionary I made out of you!” Azad retorted in a stinging tone.

I stared at him in disbelief. The hurt may have been visible on my face which had turned red. Shiv put his hand on my shoulder and gently said-

“Don’t be silly. There is no way you can take the risk to come with us.”

Of course I knew that. I clenched my fist and walked off in a huff, banging the door behind me.

*

I went straight to the terrace and let the wind wash off my tears that kept on welling in my eyes. I knew Azad was irritated, with me, with the circumstances but I could not imagine that he could have talked to me in this tone on our parting day.

I heard some footsteps behind my back and turned to see that he was taking a seat beside me. I immediately wiped off my face and looked away.

“What! Still sulking?” He placed a friendly slap on my back.

“I am fine.” I said stiffly.

“Come on! Is this the first time I have snapped at you?”

“But did you have to do it one last time too?”

“But you did speak nonsense down there!”

“I wish all those people who accused you of partiality towards me were here to see this…that I am, on the contrary, at the receiving end of all your tempers. That debate would get settled forever.”

“Ah…no! That issue was something else. The boys had placed a bet with me about me never saying a NO to you.”

“That is a wrong notion too!”

I realised how we were back to normal in a blink now!

“Exactly, remind me of an instance and I would win the bet.” He asked enthusiastically.

“Of course…there was that time…”

“Tell…”

“That time…let me think…”

“Funny, looks like they are right.” I muttered sheepishly after a while.

He had a hearty laugh which ended with a choked throat and moist eyes. He lovingly ruffled up my hair saying-

“That is the whole problem, Mr Revolutionary! That I cannot refuse your request. From the most trivial to the most grave.”

I met his eyes and in them I saw for the first time, fear- for me, for himself, for the party, for the movement. I immediately turned my face for something in me knew that each one of them would come true.

“Isn’t it strange, Pandit ji. We thought we had left behind all ties when we embarked on this journey. Now suddenly it feels like we got entangled in new ones here.”

“Yes.” He said with a faraway gaze.

“But Bhagat, life…that very life we were ready to throw away in a blink of an eye…had assumed such a perfect form in the past few months…as if it suddenly grew in worth…as if it suddenly decided to reveal its beauty, its charm…it all feels like a dream now…except that we have to wake up and realise what we forgot…”

“What?”

“That we had not come here to live together.” He said after a pause.

I knew I would have to repeat that sentence to myself on numerous occasions in the future.

“Yes…we cannot let anything cloud our judgement…the least of all…our emotions.” I muttered, squeezing his hands.

He wore an inexplicable smile on his face.

“You remember Bhagat, when you were being chased after killing Saunders…the policeman was just about to clutch your collar…I fired at him from quite a distance.”

“Of course. Only you could have achieved that feat! Firing two shots from such a distance at a man on the run…just an inch away from me…and managing to hit him with such precision!”

“You know, in hindsight, I would have never allowed myself or anyone else to take that risk. Yet at that moment all I saw was his hand that was about to grip you. That the enemy would snatch you away- right in front of my eyes- was an unimaginable prospect for me. So outrageous that I preferred putting your life in danger than allowing it! Now I am asked to dress you up and leave you at his doors. Could you not make a little allowance for my clouded judgement?” There was so much I wanted to say. But no words could be uttered with that choked throat and trembling mouth. I didn’t share my experience of the same incident- that when I was running with all my might and could feel the enemy’s breath on my neck…amidst all that adrenaline rush and excitement and thrill…the moment I saw him taking his stance with the revolver…it was

a moment where everything else faded away from my vision…the road, the trees, the noise…in that moment of surreal calm I saw his confident demeanour…his steady hands firing the shots…I felt such a surge of relief and assurance…and instantly my heart knew: as long as he was there, danger could not touch me. Death too, perhaps. Which meant- not even my cherished dream of martyrdom.

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And soon, time was up. I saw him briskly walk out of the house with his baggage while I stood inclined on a wall staring at his receding form. There was something so unreal about the moment…something numbing…as if its intensity had overshot the normal range of human experience. I stood devoid of any emotions…exceedingly calm…with a stiff and unblinking stare. With each step he took, the distance between us appeared to be more exaggerated than it actually was. And suddenly he stopped as if he forgot something. I saw him walking towards me, rummaging through his pockets.

And again he was at my arm's length. I looked at him in surprise as I felt him slide a few coins into my clenched fist.

With a very serious face he asked me- "There is surely enough time for you to have a cinema outing?

I know it is very important for a revolutionary to watch movies." He added with a twinkle in his shimmering eyes.

Before I could even make an attempt to reply, he sharply turned and hurriedly cleared out. I kept staring at those rusted coins in my hand and the ceiling in turns. And then, banging my fist on the wall, I whispered to myself-

"Sukhdev was right. Love is the source of all our self-inflicted pain."

We meet again…

The next I saw Azad was more than a year later, on the 1st of June, 1930, in very different circumstances. Our world had turned upside down in the last one year. We had gained much more than we had imagined and lost much more than we had estimated. The obscure young men he had trained were now national heroes. The ideas which were discussed in a small, dimly lit room where he sat with an amused look were now being debated across the nation. The spark he had nurtured so lovingly was now a flame spreading far and wide. But it appeared as if the edifice of our dream, our party, our work, our revolution was also getting burnt to ashes. He had prepared to part with only two of us. He lost a dozen men soon after our arrest. But being the fighter he was, he again assembled a formidable group with the help of Bhagwati bhai and ensured that some hope of succeeding in our work still remained. His belief and enthusiasm was infectious. For he could convince me that I and Battuk should escape from the prison and rejoin them to challenge the British again. In each secret letter that passed between the two of us, his idea of a jailbreak was a constant topic of discussion. I evaded it initially because I had perceived that a lot more battles remained to be fought in the jail and court. But a year later- when the hunger strike had reached its legitimate end and we had exhausted ourselves as far as propaganda in court was concerned- I did begin to consider this option. I was very clear in my mind that this was not to escape the hardships of the prison or the sentence but I was propelled by a desire to continue to make the best use of the momentum we had gained. I could see that the time for a mass revolution had arrived- people had begun to support us and Azad and Bhagwati Bhai had convinced me that I would be of great help to them and the movement. I cannot deny that I did begin to dream again- of fighting some more…of winning some more…of living some more.

And then, just a day before the intended action to rescue me and Battuk from the jail was to be carried out, I got the most dreadful news of my life. Bhagwati Bhai had lost his life in trying to test the bomb for this action. I felt as if I could not breathe for a few moments after I read the news. Sukhdev, he and I were a trio since our college days. He was senior to me and I had admired him as much as I loved him. He had an impeccable clarity of thought and could articulate it so flawlessly that we tasked him with writing all our manifestoes. And his favourite phrase, which he repeatedly quoted in each document, was — *We desire to die unknown, unhonoured, unwept.* I did not ever imagine that he would meet his aspiration in this manner.

The note further read that his last wish had been that this action be carried out unhindered and the plan remain unchanged. With trembling hands I tore the note and sank in a corner. The plan could remain unaffected but the man to be rescued could not!

It felt as if this freak accident was a cruel blow that was struck just to make me realise my folly. How on earth did I dare to think that my task was over and I should escape from here! I felt as if I had got carried away with all the accolades we were receiving and forgot that we had never embarked on this journey to 'work'- we were here to die. And only a fool would let go of the opportunity to make that glorious walk to the gallows and die in a failed jailbreak attempt or be hunted down in his safe house thereafter.

I looked for Battuk and shared this devastating news with him. He had never met Bhagwati Bhai but he understood my grief at this loss.

"I have been so foolish, Battuk! How could I even imagine that a jailbreak was appropriate. All my life I had waited for the gallows…I fought with the entire world to claim this opportunity, reserved only for the most fortunate of patriots, and now when I am one step away from achieving my dream…I decided to throw it away and indulge in an

insane adventure?" I banged the rails.

"Calm down…"

"How can I? A man has just lost his life for this mistake of mine. And in a few hours Azad would come with half a dozen men to risk theirs…All this for what?"

"So what do you want to do now, Sardar?" He asked calmly. I looked at him and saw that he was almost radiating peace…something that instantly had me unruffled.

"We cannot do this anymore. We will have to abort the plan."

"Okay. I think it is too late to send a message. We will have to back out on the spot?" I looked at his nonchalant face in silent bewilderment. For a week I had forced this man to dream of a free life- of being back on the river bank, seeing the vast blue sky again, feeling that gentle breeze once more. In a blink of a moment I snatched it all away from him. And he did not utter a word of doubt, protest, apprehension. It looked as if this life-altering change of plans made no difference to him.

But I knew Azad would not accept this decision so easily.

The much-awaited moment arrived. We were on our way to our lorry when we saw Azad and his men waiting to receive us in a motor. They kept on signalling and we just had to return the signal to let the action begin.

But we silently walked away from them. It was a breathless moment- one filled with unbearable suspense and dread- when I met his eyes and abruptly stopped in my tracks as if arrested by an invisible, intense force.

It was his desperate, pleading gaze which had comprehended my change of plan and appeared to be telling me while I was walking away- *Don't do this, Bhagat. Not this time. Please. Not again.* And I did it. Yet again. He remained that choice I could never make.

In a flash, everything was over. Our vehicle started moving in the opposite direction and that fateful crossroad- that one split-second

moment pregnant with infinite possibilities- receded from our sight.

It was such an overwhelming experience that it proved to be very difficult to maintain composure. Yet we had to appear normal lest any suspicion arise. It was only in the evening that Battuk and I got to discuss this during dinner. As we sat beside each other and put the first morsel in our mouths, we both had our eyes moist. For we recalled how the previous evening we had discussed and vividly imagined that we would have our next meal in Azad's company. And now here we were, both of us struggling against tears, trying to seek solace in the fact that we at least got to see him after more than a year.

"Azad has lost weight, hasn't he?" I asked in between the meal to break that morbid silence.

"Yes, but he looked fine. Healthy."

"Yeah, when has Mahashay ji ever fallen ill?" I said with a forced laugh.

And then I developed that familiar lump in the throat as I stammered-

"I don't know why…it feels like…was it the last we saw of him?"

Battuk did not utter a word and just crawled up to me to lean against my shoulder. In the flickering light of the lantern, we sat in a huddle and shed another of those countless mute tears that got buried in these dark alleys of the prison- never surviving to tell their tale to the world.

*

I knew I owed Azad an explanation but he never asked for any.

For the next six months that followed, I tried my best to ease his difficulty. But my means were frustratingly meagre. Yet, I managed to give him contacts, put him in touch with some old revolutionaries, suggest ways in which he could pick up the threads. But I knew that my attempt to compensate for my absence was all in vain.

His letters began to arrive less frequently. And they got shorter. As if he was trying to hide the difficulties, the failures and his despair.

It was not as if he had not seen any hardships with our old group of boys- we had battled days of penury, hunger, cold, despair and danger- yet it never felt like a burden because there was always a sense of joy accompanying us. Of course, a large part of it was due to our zeal and determination to achieve our purpose, but there was another mysterious alchemy of love that sustained us- that warmth of being in the company of men who could die for each other. And it was precisely this that was snatched away from Azad.

He was living the grand decline. It was as if a storm had blown away all the gems from his store, leaving him behind to build a castle with pebbles. And thus, in the company of the new men he had gathered, he found himself pitted against things he had never dealt with earlier: treachery, immorality, weakness, perversion, ill-will… And I knew- he who had won the battle against such grave dangers and adverse circumstances would lose when pitted against the baseness of human nature.

I had once suggested that he should consider going to Russia for a while, but he had again answered in his typical vein-

“Great idea, Mr Revolutionary! You rot in jail while I go to your beloved Russia? Even if I am left all alone, I will fight and breathe my last on this soil.”

The final blow

And then arrived the 27th of February, 1931. The day when our commander-in-chief, who had till then awed just a bunch of us, got a chance to put up a grand display of valour for the world to finally know the mettle of this elusive man the British had been hunting for the last six years. It was two days later that I got this news- a setback I ought to have been most prepared for. For even during those good old times- each day that we had spent with Azad- this feeling of danger lurking at every corner- the possibility of a mishap occurring and us losing him was a constant nagging feeling. After all, no one had evaded arrest for as long as he had managed. And in the last two years, things had got worse. When his closest aides- men who were like his shadowstarted getting arrested, I could feel the net closing in on him- I knew it could be any day. And then, that image which conjured up before my eyes- of Azad in shackles being dragged into the prison by some triumphant-looking men- was so horribly outrageous that I almost preferred his end.

And yet the news felt as if some part of my being had been lacerated.

I had faced so many setbacks in the last two years that I had become self-aware of my emotional and physical reaction to various kinds of bad news- Jatin da passed away…so-and-so is in a critical condition…Battuk is being transferred…Bhagwati Bhai is dead… It always began with the familiar reeling of the head, drying of the mouth, difficulty in breathing, a physical pain at some unidentified part of the body, tears welling up in the eyes and a slight buckling of the knee. And once all these unpleasant guests left after paying their customary visit, an inexplicable calm always surfaced from some hidden corner and enveloped me in such a protective shield that it not only made the circumstance bearable but also conquerable. But this final blow invoked a very different response- it was the most deceptive reaction. For till a long time after I heard the

news, I felt nothing but numbness. It was a blank- a total absence of any pain or feeling of loss. I suspect the condemned cell, and the fact that this was so near to my execution day, had a lot to do with this reaction- for life and death both look so drastically different when you are counting days to your end, that perhaps the manifestation of normal human emotions becomes impossible. It is not just joy that is barred from entering a condemned cell- surprisingly, grief too changes in its essence when wriggling in through those rails. Hence, a news which might have totally shattered me a few months ago felt so unreal and impersonal. I remember there were times during the last declining phase when Azad used to send his messengers to jail- all of them had a standard inquiry- Azad ji is asking- "What should be our strategy for the movement now? What is the goal, and the means, now?"

I used to mumble some instructions without much conviction- I knew there was no party, no movement, no revolution anywhere in the near sight, but the trusting eyes that looked out to me for guidance did not allow me to say so.

But sometimes while thinking about Azad, I could almost see his conjured-up face before my eyes- and could hear his familiar refrain-

"Bhagat, what are we supposed to do now?"

And I had spontaneously whispered to myself- an answer which had caught me by surprise as well- *Nothing. We have to just make an exit now.* Thus, how could I mourn for him, knowing that only a few fortunate ones get bestowed with an exit so impeccably close to the one he had dreamt for himself.

And yet, the moment my numbness receded, the gnash in my heart began to surface. And I realised that this was strange- I had anyway not met him for two years- we hardly had any opportunity to even exchange a heartfelt conversation in those infrequent secret notes- and we had practically not been a part of each other's life anymore for a long time.

So what difference did this news make? Why did this already-existing separation feel so painful suddenly? And this is when I realised something that had completely eluded me till now.

I had always understood Azad's obsession with getting me released during the days when our case was in trial. Even though I did not agree with his logic initially, at least I could perceive its presence. For behind all his efforts was a very rational instruction for me: *Come out of the prison so that we could work together and continue the fight.* What completely left me baffled was his untiring efforts to get my death sentence commuted when he began meeting leaders to plead for a life-imprisonment sentence for me. Till his last breath, this was his unfulfilled mission. And I could never comprehend this absurd desire of his to stop my hanging- for there was no way we were going to be together even if I escaped the gallows. I could now perceive that underlying all this was his heart-rending plea: *Live. Wherever you are. Just be alive.* I had always wondered- 'What difference does it make?'

I now realised- strangely- that the fact that someone is not walking on earth anymore, breathing the same air as you, does make a difference.

The fact that there is no hope of hearing from him ever again, of ever seeing him again, makes a difference. Death is a mysterious phenomenon that puts an intimidating stamp of FINALITY on a separation. But it was never an intense, overwhelming bout of grief that I experienced- this was a muted, lingering, throbbing pain that housed itself in some sublime corner of my being. Thus, in waking or in sleep, while I ate or read or wrote statements or laughed or even joked during my last days, somewhere behind all this a gnawing feeling of having lost him always persisted. The worst onslaught of haunting memories came in the evenings. In the solitude of the dimly lit cell I was visited by random scenes- some trivial, some significant- of moments spent with not just Azad but all those men who had now departed or lay scattered in

different prisons across the country. And they sometimes assumed so real a form that I felt as if my solitary cell was crowded with all those old faces- I could almost feel the warmth of the fire that used to burn in the centre of our room, around which we used to huddle, the smell of the burning charcoal in the lantern that used to hang on the window. But most vividly I could hear a distinct sound of laughter- this belonged to no individual- it was the unique fusion of ALL our laughs that produced a distinct tune to it. It was hard to forget this note- this eternal note of our camaraderie. An inimitable note that could never be the same in the absence of any one of us. A note that could never be played again.

Sometimes, our favourite songs also visited me to pay their homage to those lost evenings. Azad was most enthusiastic about these singing sessions and coerced us into singing his favourite songs. A faint smile always appeared on my face when I recalled those instances when, just to defy him, I used to break into one of those romantic ghazals which he despised. It was a delight to pull his leg about his disapproval of such indulgences.

Holding on to these delightful moments, oscillating between smiles and tears, I spent the last three weeks of my life. I sometimes wondered about the timing of his departure- could this event not have played out a month later? Could I not have departed holding on to my dream that my last warrior was still on the field, fighting and winning my unfinished battle? Could I not have done without this last blow? But perhaps Azad had the right to say-

Aapki yaad mein ashq kam na bahe,
Dard-e-judaai humne kam na sahe,
Ab yeh ranjh aap bhi farmaiye,
Yeh gum zara aap bhi aazmaiye.

The relationship I had with Azad, Battuk and some of the other friends was forged in the background of intense political struggle and painted with a fiery streak of revolution which deprived us of the luxury to express our love or exert any claim over one another. We were all meant to serve a higher cause, at the altar of which we sacrificed ourselves as well as each other. Yes, there were all those lofty ideals and purpose and duty that propelled our lives and we never lost focus, but somewhere beneath all this, there was this pulsating cry, almost like a heartbeat, which yearned for a life of togetherness.

I lived each day with this muffled pain and I knew I would carry this pang of separation till my last breath.

Or even beyond…

My Faithful Friend

BK DUTT

My companion in death he aspired to be,
sentenced he was for a life without me.

“His separation is unbearable for me too. It is only today that I feel quite perplexed and every moment has become a burden. Really it is very hard to be separated with a friend more dear than my brothers. Anyhow, we must bear all patiently.”

— Bhagat Singh, in a letter to B.K. Dutt’s sister after his transfer from Lahore Central Jail, 1930

The heated Central Committee meeting had ended. It was the last one.

Azad had reluctantly agreed to my proposal, Sukhdev had abruptly left the room, and half a dozen other men had just bid their final goodbye to me. I was naturally distracted when I hugged each one of them- thousands of thoughts whirled past me faster than I could even comprehend them. One after the other they presented their assault.

I have to talk to Azad… Why did Sukhdev not speak a word?… We have to check the bombs… The statements have to be drafted… Should I write a letter home… Am I sure about this action?… Is this an irrevocable step I am going to take?… I was so engaged in this raging battle that I did not notice that the room had been cleared empty. Except for two of us- Bottu and I.

We both broke into an instant sigh of relief as we looked at each other. And then we burst into a bout of laughter. The former was an expression of satisfaction- after days of tooth-and-nail fighting, after mooting the names of various individuals and various possibilities, after hours of trenchant arguments…WE had finally won. The latter was because we just realised that both of us had put up quite a tantrum before Azad- one had threatened him with suicide and the other with donning the orange robe if deprived of this opportunity. Recalling the bewildered and exasperated expression on Azad's face was our source of amusement for quite some time. And then, after our laughter subsided, there was just silence. A grave, pensive silence where we let the feeling sink in- this realisation- that we had always dreamt of this day. Together. Lost in our reminiscences, we recalled that five years ago, two young boys in Kanpur had spent all their evenings on the banks of the Ganges watching the sunset and dreaming of a dawn they would herald. They held naive ideals, and the vibrancy of youth coloured their fanciful imaginations, but undeterred they gave wings to their high and mighty but vague, hesitant, unsure dreams. They had no idea what lay ahead yet felt so sure

that they would always be together on this path. The two inexperienced teenagers had now metamorphosed into revolutionaries who had seen grave dangers, who knew how to wield weapons, who were now well versed in the language of revolution, who could now articulate their ideals and quote world revolutionaries to back them, and yet the moment our eyes met, I regained the innocence of that dream. That simple dream which had neither ideology nor rationale nor logic nor scheme to adorn it.

I realised I had lost a bit of its essence in these tumultuous days- had cloaked it with a lot of embellishments- after all, I had to fight my case before the Central Committee to get this action sanctioned. But as I looked at his glowing face, brimming with a mysterious smile that struggled to hold back its excitement, and his eyes shining with a yearning for this perilous journey, and then for a brief moment- a flash of surrender- I instantly recognised this sentiment. For I had still not lost it- at its core, my aspiration remained the same.

And the simplicity and purity of the desire overwhelmed my senses and I found myself holding back my tears. It had been so long since I felt this way- the books, the discussions, the debates- all of them helped to build my belief, but none of them provided this intense an experience. A certain dryness that had enveloped me for all these days was now being washed away by the warmth of this flaming experience. I began again to feel the Love that had summoned me to the path, the adoration for an unseen being or ideal that had enticed me all along. This passion of self-abandonment, the ecstasy of making a sacrifice, this quest for martyrdom- had I actually been foolish enough to let go of this pure joy in exchange for those ‘convictions’ that hardly convinced me for more than a few hours and then had me seeking endlessly for new assurances! But here I once again found invincible certitude, so effortlessly. And that raging battle I had been indulging in a minute ago…it just withdrew on

its own accord.

And all this from a single, contiguous look from him that bore nothing but the naked simplicity and sincerity of emotion! And all I needed was to recognise it.

I realised only after our journey had ended that Bottu was not just a much-needed companion assigned to me in the valley of death- he shone before me like a reflection of my own unmasked self. He brought to me, in its purest form, the glimpse of my own Being.

He represented to me the Self that was me.
He was all that I too was and could be.
Forced I was to recognise all I had denied
When a mirror he held up for my sight.
In his absolute surrender, mine I found.
In his unconditional love, mine I felt.
In his grand sacrifice, mine I comprehended.

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The next few days we spent together before the final action were a unique experience for both of us. Our life was not very different from that of every other individual on our path, but very few revolutionaries get to meet this kind of foreboding, ominous hours before their careers end. It is usually a sudden arrest or a shoot-out where, before one can even comprehend the situation, the deed is done and that irreversible turn of life has been taken. All that is left behind is unfinished tasks and regrets over unsaid words and undone deeds. For us it was quite the opposite. We were given about 14 days to…pack up. But to wrap up a life of about 20 years in two weeks was more difficult than we had imagined. The pain that a sudden, sharp severing manages to elude, we could not avoid in this prolonged agony of cutting off all ties. People have often complained about the uncertainty of the future; for us, its

certitude was the curse. We knew exactly what we were walking into- the details of the darkness were not yet known, but its essence was. And to wake up every morning and imagine that we had one less day of this bright sunshine, and to spend every evening soaking our eyes in the beautiful evening sky, trying to fight that gnawing feeling that reminded us that all of this would soon be snatched away from us, to be replaced with the bare, dark walls of the prison with all its gloom and monotony- it was a mighty test of endurance.

We kept ourselves distracted and engaged- statements were written and rewritten, all strategies were finalised- this was the battle where our thoughts, our ideals, were the only weapons we carried with us, and to present them with impeccable clarity was a huge task that kept us occupied. So we could usually shield ourselves from personal tangles- but there was something we had no armour against. It was that enticing, throbbing, breathing, vibrant thing called LIFE that was playing around us all the time and broke into our fortress with ease. It lured us from all corners- in that chirping of the bird and that splatter of the rain, in that twinkling of stars and blooming of flowers, in that noise in a crowded marketplace and that fragrance from a nearby temple, in that carefree laughter of children and that humming of a tune and tinkling of a cycle bell- there was something so alive in these mundane moments. But something so transient at the same time. As if these sights, smells, and sounds were all slowly receding from our existence. And we already began to feel a disconnect with our surroundings- we did not belong here anymore. This whirling globe, with its meagre dreams and mundane lives and trifling hopes, all began to appear unreal. And everything it offered, insufficient. But Bottu and I still spent long hours in the evening watching the world from our balcony, watching the unfolding of a monotonous yet fascinating play of human existence. It had a rhythm, a routine that was and would remain forever the same- except that we

would soon not be a part of it. It was as if, in the silence of the dusk, two insignificant actors were surveying the grand world stage before bowing out of it. The show must go on, and we certainly wished the show well. But a sense of pang remained till the last moment.

I never articulated my experience before anyone lest it be misconstrued as weakness or attachment or cowardice. I laughed and joked before others, and quite spontaneously so, since I was genuinely ecstatic about the culmination of my long-cherished desire. Yet amidst that revelry, on occasions when my eyes met Bottu's for a brief moment, we both silently acknowledged the raging storm in our hearts. I had hidden it from Azad, from Sukhdev, from every other member, but I could not hide it from him. After all, he knew this feeling not by empathy but by experience- he was in the same boat as me. And this boat of ours was on the verge of beginning its tryst with the storm.

8th April, 1929 was a day none of us could forget. It marked a turning point for our individual destinies and the collective destiny of our entire movement. Obscure young men were about to break into the firmament to script a glorious page of history that would not just make the deaf hear, but the blind see, the coward dare, and the brave applaud. The grandeur of the spectacle where we offered ourselves up for arrest before some trembling and bewildered faces who were still reeling from the effects of the mighty announcement of rebellion we made in that timid, submissive house- it was something we too could have never imagined. Hence, we were in high spirits, content and proud of our performance, as we sat in the police van being taken for interrogation. The excitement of the deed had carried us through so well that for a long time our minds did not brood on anything except the fact that we had been successful in our endeavour- everything had happened exactly how we had planned- every gesture, every slogan- we kept on playing out the event in our minds in a loop. And then suddenly came the first rude awakening- that

things from hereon would NOT necessarily be moulded by our wills anymore.

Bottu and I were to be separated and sent to different police stations for interrogation. I was about to protest when I realised that I no longer had any ground to do so. Till now, WE were the ones calling the shots. We had broken into the enemy's fortress, disturbed its functioning, almost embarrassed them out of their wits with our bold and daring act. Now, THEY had all the power to retaliate. The rules of the game were no longer decided by us. This was the first instance where I confronted this bitter truth. And certainly not the last.

As I saw Bottu being shoved away, I felt a bit perturbed. And it was not a revolutionary's feeling, worried about another comrade withstanding an interrogation. It was a friend feeling concerned about the nature of the interrogation he would have to withstand. He turned back and gave me a reassuring smile, but I could not figure out if this was meant to pacify the revolutionary or the friend. It was only when we later compared notes on this experience that we realised both our encounters were more amusing than intimidating. And it was unique in its own sense. We were kept in a makeshift cell for a long time without anyone engaging with us. Strangely, at regular intervals people used to peep in from outside and depart. Almost as if we were some rare specimen on display. The truth was that they had no idea how they ought to be approaching us- we could gauge that they remained wary of us throughout. After all, our behaviour of not escaping, and inviting arrest, was incomprehensible to most- and understandably so. It would not be too off the mark to say that some of them actually thought, or wished in their hearts, that it was not too far a possibility that we would turn out to be madmen instead of revolutionaries. This explained why we could see so much frenzy outside- but no one daring to venture in to talk to us. The standard protocol of interrogation was in peril, because of

not-so-standard convicts! And after hours, when perhaps a ruffled administration instructed its minions to handle us, a few authoritative-looking gentlemen finally came to talk to us. And the usual tactics of force, coercion, and deception were used to try to break us down. We sailed past this quite easily. In fact it was interesting to see that just by virtue of not being provided with that opportunity of hunting us down and triumphantly arresting us, they were deprived of the natural upper hand over us. The very fact that they had not conquered but rather been obliged during our capture was enough to disarm them. But they were no chivalrous sportsmen, to take this defeat in the right spirit. The impotency manifested in their violence, which was exaggerated almost as if to make up for the lost honour.

But this ordeal ended much faster than we had expected. It is a noteworthy quality of the predator that it is impeccably accurate in its perception of the worth of its prey. It does not take more than a few minutes for the police to identify which mouth is going to remain sealed and which would sing to tune. The British, being prudent by nature, did not waste much time and energy on us.

Soon we were shifted to Delhi jail and kept in adjacent cells, but with such a thick wall in between that we could not even hear each other's voice. Yet, in that hostile, unfamiliar atmosphere, the very thought that 15 metres away from me there existed someone who was neither the 'enemy' nor a stranger, someone whom I knew and loved, proved to be a source of great comfort.

The first few days of our trial were a pandemonium which both of us thoroughly enjoyed. Lies were told, witnesses tutored, statements manipulated- and yet we sat calm and indifferent, refusing to defend or answer any question. We were aware that popular perception was not yet in our favour; the enemy exploited this fact to try to defeat us, but we still did not engage in these rounds of their petty game, for we knew that

with one elegant statement we would win the finale. We let them revel in their small victories while we made full use of the time we got to spend together. After all, it was only a matter of a few hours, and then both of us would be back to the gloomy cells to fight our individual battles. So sometimes our banter got so loud that we had to be repeatedly reminded that this was a court. And then we would straighten up for a while and participate in the drama by putting up a serious, engrossed face, nodding animatedly at some statements as if we were following them with the utmost interest. Bottu would turn to me occasionally and say, with mock seriousness-

"So you see, Mr Singh, apparently you were trying to shoot and could not do so only because your pistol miraculously jammed."

"Yes, Mr Dutt- apparently the bomb also miraculously flew from my hands and landed on the empty benches while I was aiming to kill Sir George."

"Hmm, quite an overdose of miracles. Looks like the Assembly Hall had turned into a church with our presence."

We would turn to each other. There was always a moment of silence where we tried our best to restrain ourselves. And then, resounding laughter, much to the annoyance of the judge. I loved the ring of that carefree laughter; its echo stayed with me till the end. I cherished it perhaps because it used to transport us from this morbid atmosphere back to those evenings on the riverbank, where such nonsensical jokes and pranks abounded. But strangely, it had more charm in these new circumstances. For here it was our tool of defiance- the weapon which rattled our enemy the most.

This fun and frolic did not make us forget our purpose and responsibilities. A large part of our goal was to use the courtroom as a tool to expose the British and draw the attention of our countrymen to this struggle. But in the Assembly Bomb Case, the stage for this opulent

display had not been laid. This was a more low-key affair- the final showdown would be on a larger platform- the Lahore Conspiracy Case that would begin in a month. But we knew we had to be equipped for that clash, and this case provided us the perfect opportunity to gain practical knowledge about the nature of the battle. We had to study the enemy before we could defy it. So, with keen interest, we observed the workings of this court- the language of the lawyers, the nature of the arguments, the clauses and acts- the intricate machinery of this farcical administration was unravelled before our eyes in two weeks of this trial. We subsequently used these same tools, with a finesse and expertise which the enemy had itself unwittingly bestowed upon us.

And then came that unforgettable meeting with our lawyer. The day I realised how an act of mine- which I had considered inconsequential- could assume such significance in the court of law that it would have the ability to change the course of our destiny. One of ours, at least.

It is true that Bottu and I had both individually carried bombs into the Assembly House, but while dispensing them- in the heat of the moment after I threw the first bomb- I took the second one from his hands too. None of us ever imagined that it actually made any difference as to who threw the bomb, as long as both bombs did their job. But we were wrong. In a legal battle, such irrelevant details are blown up to an absurd extent. Thus, our lawyer quite proudly conveyed his discovery to us- that since Bottu had not actually thrown any bomb, he could get his sentence reduced. The gleaming look on the lawyer's face lost a bit of its shine when it met our impassive faces. The magnitude of the sentence had always been such a trivial detail for us that it took us some time to comprehend the significance of the bargain. And once we did, we both were- for a change- experiencing contrary emotions. I cannot deny that I did feel a tinge of joy when I understood what this entailed- Bottu would be spared a term of life imprisonment! But I can vouch that Bottu felt

anything but joy.

His expression changed from confusion, to comprehension, to outrage, as he blurted: “Of course NOT.”

The lawyer had never seen this side of Bottu and was taken aback, but still persisted: “Mr Dutt, just sign this statement- I will take care of this.”

“But I don’t want it taken care of! We both went in together- the act was done in unison- and when the time comes to bear the punishment, I am to exploit a loophole in the law and escape? Ridiculous, this is, Bhagat.”

He turned to me, expecting me to back him up, and was surprised when he saw my conflicted face.

“Bhagat? What? You surely don’t mean-”

“Listen to me, Bottu.”

“No way, you cannot ask me to do this.”

“Just hear me out once- our job is already done, our joint statement is on record, the impact we intended is achieved- but it is not necessary that both of us bear the same sentence- there is no point being irrationally sentimental here.”

“Sentimental?”

“Yes. You know half of our gang has been arrested; Azad is left quite helpless- if at least one of us can go back to him, it will be good in the interest of the party- there is much to do.”

“I see. Bhagat, does it occur to you that if BOTH of us had actually been practical and escaped from the Assembly House, Azad’s helplessness, the party’s peril, and this absurd discussion of ours would not have come into existence. This is convenient- when you take a decision it is on the basis of ‘conviction’; when I do it, it is ‘irrational sentimentality’?”

This was the first time I saw his defiance- the first time he stood up against me. For me. I continued firmly-

"I am not going to allow you to do this. Tomorrow we will give a new application in court saying…"

"You will not! You cannot decide everything, Bhagat. It was your decision that I come along with you. But how far I am to remain with you- that will be my call, sir."

I was not going to give in so easily, even if this fight took an ugly turn. So I tried to change tactics and press the point by way of authority.

"I, as a member of the Central Committee, place an order before you to…"

"Stop it, Bhagat." He cut me short. "The time for all that has passed. Look around you- there is no party, no committee, no rules, no oaths anymore. All of that sounds strange now, almost like an unreal dream. The only reality that now exists for us is the bars, the dark dungeon, or the noose. And wherever it is you are heading to, I am not leaving you alone there. That's all."

I saw the deadlock in our conversation, yet I continued. I threw all my weapons at him, and he calmly repelled them. The more agitated I got, the more firm ground he appeared to gain. There was a tremor in my body, my voice shook, but his gaze remained steadfast. This distracted me and my train of thought started to grow jerky. I suddenly noticed that my words and his stance both began to look uncannily similar to something I had heard and held not too long ago. Very soon this conversation started taking a very familiar turn for me, as if quite recently a voice filled with this intense an affection and desperation had been pleading before ME to change my decision- and an inexplicable urge, a choice that was beyond any thought or argument, had withstood this onslaught.

I got it at last- the dissuasion was Azad's, the persistence mine, and the occasion was the Central Committee meeting where this action was planned. I did not know then that very soon the tables would turn and I would be at the receiving end of this maddening thing called strength of conviction. An ironic smile curled up on my lips and I finally conceded defeat. I saw that the lawyer had taken up the opportunity to talk to Bottu on my behalf, as I had fallen silent, indulging in my musings. Bottu was tired of his talk and shot an exasperated but expectant look at me, which conveyed the unsaid words- At least you should not take so long to understand the stuff irrevocable decisions are made of!

I did understand, and hence I gestured at the lawyer to stop. There was no point going on- yet I decided to say those final words with which Azad had ended our similar conversation.

"Okay, I am no longer dissuading you- but a lot of decisions are made without taking into account their far-reaching implications. The burden of our choices sometimes has to be borne for life. I want you to answer for both of us- are you sure you would never regret this gambleeven if circumstances assume a very different form in the future?" I myself did not know what I was hinting at, but the words just flowed of their own accord.

"Regret being by your side?" He asked in a choked voice.

That was it. I could no longer restrain the flood that had been brimming in my eyes. There was nothing incomprehensible about the decision- I knew if I were in his place I would have done the same too. But the beauty of a virtue you fail to notice when it forms an intrinsic part of your nature, you are forced to recognise when you see it in another. And the circumstance in which this was revealed to me stirred me to my very depths. This dark, stuffy room, with its bare walls and threatening bars, must have been the abode of the lowest of human emotions- the very worst of man surges up from below here. Betrayal

and treachery, weakness and cowardicethis interrogation room must have been their breeding ground for ages. Could something so pure and beautiful really flower in this mire?

I knew that man is capable of loyalty and solidarity- a revolutionary, even more so. But this unconditional a love, such self-abnegating surrender, could come so effortlessly to a man at this grave a crossroad- that without a blink he could invite himself into the portals of hell- this was a revelation for me too. After spending so many days in this exile- breathing either apathy or hostility, meeting only empty hours devoid of any warmth, colour, hope- perhaps a barrenness had seeped into my heart as well. It was only now, when I could feel an overwhelming stir there, that I realised I too housed a beating one. A lot of the aspects of the world had been renounced, but the time to abdicate all human ties had not come yet.

Soon we were walking out of the room, arm in arm, and I was suddenly gripped by a sense of unease. It was true that we had managed to evade the law and its consequences for now- but I could not ignore the heaviness in my heart, which felt as if we had only postponed a tragedy and increased its magnitude. I knew that we would not be able to deceive ourselves, or our enemy, or our destiny for long- a separation was inevitable. For burdens may be shared for a while, but fates CANNOT be shared.

I saw his beaming, triumphant face and decided not to voice my thoughts. We had indeed stolen a moment, and it was best to cherish it. For as long as we could.

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And then came the fateful day- after more than a year. July 1930.

The court suddenly decided to pass an early sentence on Bottu, since they were now able to perceive that he could not be implicated in anything that deserved a higher punishment than the life imprisonment

already given to him in the Assembly Bomb case. I knew this all along- he knew it too- no matter what we did or said now, the fact that he was NOT involved in a significant part of the 'conspiracy' would remain.

It was late in the afternoon; we sat in the jail courtyard with a sense of foreboding. He had not yet lost all hope and kept on asking me-

"But surely I was involved in the party's work, in most of the plans. Tell me, except Saunders- what have I missed? And then some of the approvers- no, unfortunately not many identified me- but still, there is no way I can be absolved of it, right?"

"Yes." I answered, still unconvinced.

"And so, technically, I should also get a death sentence, right? Since I will be punished under two cases- the Assembly Bomb and the Lahore Conspiracy…"

"Well…"

"Then why are they singling me out now, why do they have to pass a sentence on me this early when your case is still ongoing…this means…"

He began to pace up and down frantically. I could feel his anxiety- this was not about the sentence; it was about another possibility that was now looming large before us. He began again- "But in case they pass a sentence on me, that would not necessarily mean a transfer from this jail, right? I mean I can still remain here, with you?"

This one I did not answer.

And then the dreaded news was communicated to us by a stoic gentleman who read out the sentence in an almost indiscernible drawl. Though we both expected it, we were in a daze for some time. A kind jailer walked up to us and whispered… "It will be any day now. His transfer…"

I felt a tremble in my knee, but Bottu went far beyond that- he collapsed on the ground. It had been an unwritten rule between the two

of us not to show any form of weakness before the authorities. It was not that we never succumbed in this past one year, but never were we allowed to display it. Anything which gave the enemy the pleasure of victory and the satisfaction of an upper hand was to be avoided. Hence, the worst of the violence had been borne by us with a defiant and loud cry when a smile was not possible, silence when an argument was not possible, and stoic fortitude when indifference was not possible. All tears, anxiety, and pain were allowed to manifest only in the solitude of our cells. And it was not as if Bottu ever forgot this pact before today. I remember the time I had almost fainted after my first force-feeding session- I was half-conscious and could see his worried face peering over me- but not one cry was raised, not one utterance of helplessness or plea for mercy, even on my behalf. As if his worry would blemish my courage, he gulped it all down. I did not do so well in similar circumstances, and had created quite a fuss when he had lost consciousness in court during the hunger strike. Later he admonished me and reminded me of my own rule. It was then that I realised that the threshold of pain one can endure oneself is always higher than what one can bear to see a loved one endure. Today, as I saw him on the verge of a breakdown- a man who had lived for a year in this hell, endured unspeakable horrors, played and won a prolonged game of hide-and-seek with Death- I understood another aspect of human existence: the threshold of pain the body can bear is higher than what the heart can withstand.

It was unnatural for me to stand apart and just stare at him, but I did not dare to go near him. I was not sure what I should have told him- what solace, what comfort- there was really nothing to say. On the contrary, perhaps my presence would have made things worse. For both of us. Thankfully the prison gong rang, indicating that it was time to return to the cells for the night. Somehow I gathered the strength to make a move,

for I did not want the guard, who was roughing up the other prisoners to wind things up, to get to him before me. I gently helped him get up and said, in a matter-of-fact tone, patting his shoulder-

"We will talk tomorrow. Keep strong."

I could perceive that he was avoiding my eyes. He nodded and dragged his feet as he went towards his cell.

I kept staring at his shadow slowly receding from my sight. I heard a guard say to another as they were clearing out of the courtyard-

"But I don't understand the fuss- didn't this man just escape a death sentence?" I did not wait to hear what reply was given to explain the scene that had just played out. Whatever it was, it would have missed the mark anyway. For no one except the two of us knew the answer to that one.

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I can say with certitude that both of us spent that night awake.

It felt like an unannounced storm had suddenly swept over us with its vigour and thrown us onto two ends of a forlorn shore to deal with the reeling after-effects.

An invisible wound appeared to begin bleeding somewhere.

Azad's words kept echoing in my mind- "We had not come here to live together."

"But why were we being denied the opportunity to die together?" I questioned aloud. It almost felt like a conspiracy- that everything we willed was to be annihilated at the altar of a will more mighty and prevailing. That every thread of solace and comfort, every remnant of it, was decreed to be snatched away. I was surprised to see some resentment surging up within myself. It was a strange kind of revolt against an unseen being- fate, perhaps. Everything just appeared so unfair- that some strangers in a courtroom could, with a stroke of a pen, just rob us of something so precious- our togetherness. And this time, he would part

from me FOREVER. Then some part of me suddenly reminded me- But YOU yourself are also going to soon part with EVERYTHING forever!

It felt like a jolt. As if for the first time I comprehended where I was heading. Like a sailor, enthused about the voyage, lost in the joy of sailing, who is reminded of his destination only when he sees the approaching port, I too awakened to the awareness of what it meant to be in a condemned cell.

I was sure this was not fear or grief about death. But there was a strange kind of emotion gripping me. That horror of losing people- of never seeing some faces, never hearing some voices, never gripping some hands, never embracing some friends- NEVER EVER AGAIN. This aspect of my impending sentence had not occurred to me before. It was only now that it presented itself to me with such intensity. The brevity of life and the swiftness of time- both aspects appeared to pound me almost with a crushing weight. I was forced to look back at all those years we had left behind, and suddenly our association appeared so brief. It looked as if it was just yesterday that I had met him for the first time in that park in Kanpur, where we had almost got into a scuffle, as both of us suspected the other to be a spy. That was a memory bound to raise a smile no matter what the circumstances.

And somehow, that smile just stayed on my face for the entire night. It must have been a very strange sight for the prison guard- to see a man leaning against a wall with an upward gaze in the wee hours of the night, looking into nothingness and periodically smiling with a twitch of the face. And right till dawn, I sat there looking at the ceiling, my neck strained and eyes hurting- yet I did not move from that posture. As if any slight movement would disturb the peace and equilibrium I had unexpectedly achieved. In a loop, my mind kept playing that one scene, and I kept on smiling. It was only when the prison gong rang in the morning that I broke from my stupor. And was surprised to find that my

face was slightly wet- the disobedient showers of the eyes had managed to flow after all.

The next day, a kind Indian jailer, Chattar Singh, came running to me with news that I quite expected. Bottu was unwell and was refusing to go to the hospital or eat anything. I followed the jailer to his cell and quietly went and sat by his side. Not a word did I utter. An elderly guard placed his hand on Bottu's forehead and announced-

"See, it is burning. And not a drop of water has he touched. What will this madness achieve?" I still sat mute.

And then that guard nudged me too, saying-

"And as if you are any better- look at your harrowed face!"

"What is it that you boys are up to now?" Chattar Singh burst out in a desperate, pleading tone. He still only met our stubborn silence.

Two or three guards cleared out of the cell after a while, as if they had grown bored of this rather uninteresting scene.

I knew the rest of them stared expectantly at me to pacify him. I could not bring myself to utter any word. It was as if someone who was himself burning in that same fire of grief and defiance, an unusual rage and anger at the world, at the circumstances, at everyone and no one in particular, was expected to throw water on someone else's flaming wound. Soon the jailer and the elderly guard also gave up, but they left a plate of food and medicine behind. It remained untouched the entire day.

In the evening they returned to find me still inclined against the wall beside him, with a drooping head, and his head still under the blanket. It was then that the elderly guard who had seen our struggle from the very first day, who had been a witness to every day of the last year- all our smiles, jokes, tears, everything- could not restrain himself.

"What is wrong with both of you? Have you not endured greater wounds than this? Yes, things did not happen according to your will, but so what? Was everything in the past according to it? Yet that smile never

left your face. After making such illumined sacrifices, will you now, in this last phase, make such a begrudging one?"

I could almost swear that I saw a flash of light, like an arrow, pierce through my chest when he said the last sentence. The anger, resentment, self-pity- all dissolved in a flash. As if his words had found their target and destroyed the dark knot that we had begun to nurture. Suddenly, it felt as if the grief was unburdening itself of all its impurities, and a purified emotion now lay before us, inviting us to embrace it.

And at last Bottu turned his face towards me. I could see in his eyes that the words had had a similar effect on him too- he had now won his battle as well. I reached for a glass of water and held it before him. He drank without uttering a word.

And I don't know what happened in between, but the next moment my memory recorded was that we were both locked in a hug, with him weeping on my chest and me consoling him with tears in my eyes too. This was our first and last cathartic outburst of this kind. In between our sobs, I kept on muttering-

"It is okay. We can overcome this. We will fight it out."

And fight we did.

The next day, we met as usual in the jail courtyard, where we spent the entire day on our favourite spot under a large banyan tree. I brought some books, notes, pens, as we were used to spending most of the time studying together. For an hour or so, things looked so normal that we almost forgot about the storm that had been raised two days ago. And then, during lunch one day, he raised the topic again-

"Have you heard anything about the date of departure?"

I turned apprehensively towards him, fearing a relapse, but was reassured. His face was strained but taut- he was unlikely to lose composure again. He had won it once, and would retain the victory till the end. I realised that I too was now in a position to deal with these

circumstances without breaking apart.

"No, not yet. Must be next week. Usually, it happens at night, with strict security and secrecy. I doubt they would inform us beforehand…"

"Hmm, which means suddenly, one fine morning, you will no longer find me here." I was pleasantly surprised to see that he said this with a small laugh.

"Yes, but it won't be the first time you would pull this disappearing act. Remember the hunger strike? You were shifted to the hospital overnight and I was left to comprehend your mysterious disappearance without any help from these guards."

"But you followed me there quite swiftly! I think it was two or three nights later that I suddenly found you lying in the next bed…"

"And you had asked the most ridiculous question ever!"

"Come on! I was under sedation…"

"Yes, but the first thing I heard from you was- 'Bhagat, are we alive? Or is this the other world?'" We both laughed out loud. Ah! That ringing laughter was back again. I continued-

"But you know the funny thing was, when I understood the question, I got a bit confused, since I too was hardly conscious. So I started looking around with a dizzy head to figure out the answer to your question- the surroundings obviously looked new, since we were no longer in our cells, and the bedding also felt softer than the hard stone floor, and there were some flower pots in the vicinity too. I was about to conclude that we were in heaven, perhaps, when I saw a police uniform, and in it the great Inspector Syed Abdul, twirling his moustache, peering at me with his fierce eyes, and his thundering voice screaming- 'Look at me. Can you hear me?' And instantly I knew- with him around, this could be anything but heaven!"

"Haha, and remember when…"

He went on to narrate some incident, but I didn't quite hear it completely. His lively voice and animated narration slowly faded from my awareness as I lost myself in other thoughts. This night in the hospital that we were now discussing so lightly- no one in the world could ever imagine what we had experienced there. It was the longest night of our lives, one that crawled at an ominous pace. It is not usual for prisoners to be taken to hospital, no matter how serious their ailment, and for non-conforming prisoners like us, one can imagine just how precarious our state must have been for the enemy to allow this compassionate transfer to a more bearable surrounding. It had been a month of hunger strike. The body had reached, and perhaps overshot, its threshold of endurance- hence there was only a numbing sensation- which made it difficult for us to identify what ailment, which part, which organ… Everything and nothing.

The added feature here was that, earlier, it was only the body that had succumbed- now, even the mind was no longer able to hold on. Cyclic bouts of fainting, hallucinations, incoherent thoughts… So the body could not move and the mind could not think. Yet there was something that was aware of everything. It saw the ceiling, the dim light hanging on the wall. It felt the breeze, the smell of medicines. It knew where we were, what we were battling, what defeat here meant… But above all- what it most acutely felt was loneliness. Never before, and never again, did I feel that kind of gloom and despair. That prison hospital, with its cold apathy, intensified the feeling of being unloved, uncared for, and unwanted. No matter what we meant for our nation, and how inspirational we were to its citizens, here we were nothing more than an inconvenience which the enemy would gladly dispose of. And yet, even here, I was not alone.

Beside me lay a man who was going through exactly what I was experiencing. In fact, he was like a mirror- for when I turned towards

him, and saw his body shrivelled, face sunken, writhing and shivering, I turned away in horror for a moment. So this is what I too looked like! I could now comprehend the strange reactions I had been observing in people who were dealing with us- my father's look of devastating terror when he had met me in the cell, the uncomfortable gaze of the doctors, even the uncannily compassionate ones of the British officers.

There was another thing that bothered us whenever we regained consciousness. The enemy had put a plate of food beside our bedside, hoping that at some point we would finally succumb. There was no scope for any temptation from the food- but there was this fear of not being in control of ourselves, of giving in to a purely physical reflex which could no longer withstand this suffering and would want a way out. Also, both of us were aware that either one of us could breathe his last at any moment- and there existed a way to avoid that. One of us had only to grab the food- the other would have followed, not wanting the former to alone feel the guilt of having broken the fast. That neither of us would take in the food to save our own lives was expected- but that we managed to NOT do it even when we knew it could save the other's life- that was a revelation. Ordinary love was surely not capable of handling this dilemma. It required some other kind of emotion to hang on in those trying circumstances and make the difficult choice.

We knew this battle was raging in both our minds- one gesture from us and two lives could have been saved. But something far more valuable was at stake. We were not in a position to speak or even whisper, yet we managed to extend our hands and let them meet. A lot of unsaid words appeared to have been conveyed.

That entire night we lay awake and immobile, listening to each other's laboured breath and the perpetual groans. There is a sense of indignity a man feels when displaying physical sufferingan embarrassment of some kind, even when it is with people who are our

own. Here, that last facade was also thrown away and we lay there unashamed. We had truly seen each other's best and worst, and transcended both.

"What are you thinking?" He interrupted my musings.

"Nothing. I was just recalling that night. Wonder how we survived that one. I was sure I would not make it."

"Yeah, me too."

"But I remember feeling quite happy for a while even back then." He added after a pause.

"As in?" I realised I had never asked him about his experience of those events.

"I was worried for a while when I was alone for the first two nights, since I didn't know how you were faring outside and felt as if I had abandoned you. But the moment you too were brought in and placed beside me, I was calm and almost joyous again. I knew it was a perilous battle we were to fight, but there was no fear or anxiety anymore. For there was nothing to complain about- this is what we had always envisioned- fighting and dying for a cause. And even if both of us had died that night, it would still have been a perfect end- to die together!" I saw his face drop abruptly.

I knew it was time to change the topic.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. I want you to sign my diary."

"Ah? What for?"

"Nothing, I just want the autograph of this great revolutionary sitting by my side." I said, pulling his leg.

"Stop it! Trust you to come up with such bizarre ideas."

"Ah! The last time you said exactly the same words was when I forced you to come with me to the photo studio a few days before the Assembly Bomb Action. Gosh! What a tantrum you threw then! And after all that cajoling, you still showed your displeasure by not even

facing the camera! Look at that photo- wait, I think I have a newspaper cut-out somewhere- yes, here it is. See, looking out of the frame!"

He took the photo from my hand and smiled sheepishly.

"Yes, I was shy to face the camera. But who has ever managed to evade your pestering! But I am glad you made me do this. This historic photo we had taken together will remain a lasting memory forever."

I extended my hand to take the photo back.

"Let me keep it with me."

"No way, that is the last copy I have. I want to keep it."

"No! I am keeping it."

"Of course not."

We soon indulged in a playful fight, arguing about ownership of the picture. He ran away with it and I chased him all around the courtyard. At last I caught him, and I, always being the winner in such scuffles, managed to take it back. He conceded defeat and we sat down, laughing, panting and gasping for breath.

Soon he said, in a more serious tone-

"Let me keep it. It will be a memento of our togetherness for me."

"So it will be for me too." I argued.

"But I have a longer journey to make." He looked straight into my eyes with a piercing gaze.

"Fine. Take it."

Seeing his grim face, I slapped his back-

"But on one condition. That you put your autograph in my diary."

"Stop calling it an autograph!" He protested loudly.

"Ok, fine, fine. I promise not to call it an autograph- now sign it." I said, with a secretive smile.

"I know this naughty smile of yours very well," he murmured, as he finally took the pen from my hand.

The prison gong went on and ended this beautiful rendezvous.

“See you tomorrow,” we said, and patted each other and walked back to our individual cells. That tomorrow never came.

*

It must have been past midnight when I suddenly woke up to unusual noise and movement outside the cell. I sleepily looked around and was about to go back to sleep when I heard a clear, accented voice saying- “It is time. Bring the prisoner out.”

I leapt out instantly, muttering to myself- No, no, it cannot be so soon.

I was peering through the bars, looking for any discernible movement in the dark, when suddenly a man walked past me, heavily surrounded by guards, slowly dragging his feet in fetters.

“Bottu!”

He turned towards me and I could hardly recognise him- his face was white and wore no expression, except a hardened look that was trying its best to conceal its true state. A considerate European jailer asked the convoy to stop in front of my cell, instructing the guards to go and confirm if the vehicle was ready.

I extended my hands through the bars and Bottu clutched them tightly.

I wanted to embrace him, but the bars obstructed my advance.

I looked at the jailer, pleadingly- “Can you let me out?”

“Sorry.”

“Please, sir? Just for a minute?”

He shook his head and hung it down, implying his helplessness in this matter.

I jerked at the bars in frustration.

Bottu was a mute spectator who looked as if in a daze.

“Bottu? Say something?” I squeezed his hands.

No answer.

“Keep strong. It is okay. We will write to each other? Ok? Yes?”

He nodded without looking up. I could see his collar was wet with tears.

And the convoy started moving again. I had to finally let go of his hand. But he still held on to mine for a second longer.

“Take care”- was all I could manage to mumble. He still did not look at me and walked away. But before he made the turn at the corner leading away from the cells, he stopped and turned towards me. Finally.

I spontaneously broke into a reassuring smile and waved my hand slightly. The light was too dim for me to discern whether he reciprocated or not. But I was glad that he could now carry this smiling face of mine as his lasting memory.

Slowly his shadow receded from my sight, and I was left alone holding the bars, straining my neck to catch a glimpse of him for as far as my sight allowed.

I do not recollect how long I kept standing, holding those rails, before I moved back into the cell and sank into the corner. Our paths had diverged irrevocably. There was almost a sense of relief that this inevitable event had finally played itself out- it was painful, but at least it was OVER.

But it was only the next morning that I realised the worst was yet to come.

Right from the time the morning gong rang, and the prison doors were opened, I felt as if this was my first day here. Everything felt unfamiliar. I walked out and stood in the corridor, unsure of what I was supposed to do. For an entire year a particular routine had been followed- there was a rhythm which now appeared disturbed. There was this exact spot where I used to wait for Bottu every morning, and then we would walk to the courtyard together, sit under a tree, spend the entire day together, and then retire in the evening. I stood at that spot,

looking longingly at his empty cell. A guard walked up to me and asked me to get moving. I had lost all sense of direction, and just blindly followed the crowd that was moving out towards the courtyard. I took my seat under the banyan tree, but his absence there made even the cool shade unbearable. It felt as if each leaf carried a memory of our conversations, jokes, antics, fights, smiles, tears, hopes, despair. It felt so strange to sit there alone now. I looked around and saw the prisoners talking and laughing in groups, and felt even more alienated, knowing I could not join them. There was a wall that separated us- after all, I did not really belong in this prison.

And now I had finally lost that one companion who had made these morbid surroundings bearable.

And this was only the first day. The momentary despair I felt at this thought was overwhelming. I consoled myself, thinking- It is fine. I will get used to it. Anyway, very soon the sentences will be passed. This phase will be over soon.

And then I recalled his words- “I have a longer journey to make.” And my heart sank, thinking that he would have to deal with this grief without the aid of the solace I had- that it will all be over soon. *(Appendix E)* I struggled to distract my thoughts, but in vain. Thus, for a change, I felt extremely glad when the prison gong rang in the evening- this torture at the courtyard was finally over. I had never been so glad to return to the solitude of my cell. For at least the loneliness there felt legitimate, usual, and familiar.

As soon as I was alone in the cell, I took out the jail diary and rapidly turned the pages to find his signature.

I kept staring at it for a long time, feeling it with my fingers, which I repeatedly ran over it. It pained me to think that this was all that was left of our association- a signature. And very soon, these fingers caressing it would also not remain. I saw a tear drop onto the page and immediately

wiped it off, scared that it would spoil his sign. I then lovingly embraced the diary, making it touch my heart. It felt very soothing and stirring at the same time. And then suddenly I chuckled as I recalled the last argument we had about the signature. Deciding to break my promise, I took up a pen and, silently smiling to myself, wrote below his sign-

Autograph of Mr B.K. Dutt, taken on 12th July 1930. (Appendix F)

An improbable but comforting thought crossed my mind- that one day, years later, in completely different circumstances, when this strife and struggle would have ended, and even its remnants would lie in dust, he would, perhaps with grey hair and weak eyesight, sit under a tree beneath an evening sky, holding this diary in his trembling hands. He might look at the memento I had made of this rusted page and recollect the tale behind it, and break into his characteristic, indulgent smile that- in spite of all protests and admonishments- always allowed my will to finally prevail. ALWAYS. Except when he asserted the right to choose his Destiny.

Appendix

Appendix A

THE TEXT OF HIS LETTER AS PUBLISHED IN 'BANDE MATRAM' (Urdu Daily) on 10th April, 1931 — for the first time

"Sardar Bhagat Singh in the eyes of his Martyr Comrade Sukh Dev"

A highly emotional article written by Sukh Dev from the prison cell of the jail.

"He" — Sardar Bhagat Singh and "I"

"(Neither) you are mine (nor) I am yours, — we both belong to the nation.

"Following Assembly bomb dropping, and Sardar Bhagat Singh and Mr. Dutt's arrest, within a week police raided Kashmir Building and arrested Mr. Sukh Dev along with his comrades. These gentlemen were shifted to Central Jail, after a few weeks where Mr. Sukh Dev wrote this highly emotional article, which we withheld (from publication) till date, on grounds of practical considerations. Today we present it to our readers for their perusal." — Editor

Excerpts:

That day's event (Assembly bomb incident — Editor) caused a cataclysm in my life. The whole world began appearing gloomy. The charms of worldly life deserted me and I began saying that no one who's mine survives, what is left behind now is work; there is no belonging or non-belonging in it. (When) I talked (with someone) my mind was roaming elsewhere; I laughed but my laughter was 'smileless'. I remained busy with work, but more like a robot and little like a human. It seemed that what was mine had been taken away from me. Now that is no longer mine.

I knew that he (Bhagat Singh) had gone as per my wishes; it was no one else but me who had compelled him to go. On these very lines, I tried to convince myself. In fact I had myself seen him going with my own eyes; when he was leaving me, by then he was no longer mine. We both belong to the nation, to the world. That is why I had told him to go, and he left.

It is now that I realised that he was mine, I am his. I cannot reason with him, nor can I separate him from myself. But he has gone, at a great distance, so distant where I cannot reach, nor can he come back.

This worry broke my heart, my mind got lost in search of him, his image began revolving before my eyes, day and night without end. My body became numb, and still. Sitting, standing, moving around all the while I remain absorbed in him. In everything, in every human being, at every place his image would be lingering in my mind. Sometimes I felt as if he was calling me, I would be stunned. Then, he would not be found anywhere around. Whatever direction I looked, his handsome face, his dreamy eyes appeared to be whirling in my mind's eye like a mirage.

…….

On 27th May, I was sent to jail. All the time I kept lying on the narrow platform (khaddi) in my prison cell. I (always) perceived that somebody is clinging to me, and I am clinging to him. Sometimes I would think of getting away from him, but this idea used to make me nervous. I would try to embrace him tightly, close to my heart. Sometimes I felt as if somebody is forcibly snatching him from me, and is trying to disentangle me from him. Then I would start weeping bitterly. While sobbing I would go to bed with a novel beneath my head. These novels were of Sharat Babu.

Proceedings of our case started. Again we met. Because of whom, there had been disappointment actually appeared. Pangs of separation were substituted by warmth of the union. Instead of an image, a human figure began to be seen. Instead of an imaginary picture, the real one appeared in person. In place of "him" I got Bhagat Singh. That day it dawned upon me that "he" can never be mine.

Source: Waraich, Malwinderjit Singh. Shahid Sukh Dev [Martyr Sukh Dev]. Unistar Books.

Appendix B

BHAGAT SINGH'S LETTER TO SUKHDEV — 5/4/1929

Dear Brother,

By the time you receive this letter I will be gone, going to a far off destination. Let me assure that I am prepared for the voyage in spite of all the sweet memory and in spite of all the charms of my life here. Up to this day one thing pinched in my heart and it was this that my brother, my own brother, misunderstood and accused me of a very serious charge — the charge of weakness. Today I am quite satisfied, today more than ever do I feel that was nothing, but a misunderstanding, a wrong calculation. My overfrankness was interpreted as my talkativeness, and my confession as my weakness. And now I feel it was misunderstanding and only is understanding. I am not weak, not weaker than anyone amongst us, brother. With a clear heart I go, will you clear too? It will be very kind of you. But note that you are to take no hasty step, soberly and calmly you are to carry on the work. Don't try to take the chance at the very outset. You have some duty towards the public, and that you can fulfill by continuing this work. As a suggestion I would say that M.R. Shastri appeals to me more than ever. Try to bring him in the arena, provided he himself may be willing, clearly knowing the dark future. Let him mix with men and study their psychology. If he will work in the right spirit, he will be the better judge. Arrange as you may deem fit. Now, brother, let us be happy.

By the way, I am say that I cannot help arguing once again my case in the matter under discussion. Again do I emphasise that I am full of ambition and hope and of full charm of life. But I can renounce all at the time of need, and that is the real sacrifice. These things can never be hinderance in the way of man, provided he be a man. You will have the practical proof in the near future. While discussing anybody's character you asked me one thing, whether love ever proved helpful to any man. Yes, I answer that question today. To Mazzini it was. You must have read that after the utter failure and crushing defeat of his first rising he could no bear

the misery and haunting ideas of his dead comrades. He would have gone mad or committed suicide but for one letter of a girl he loved. He would as strong as any one, nay stronger than all. As regards the moral status of love I may say that it in itself is nothing BUT PASSION, not an animal passion but a human one, and very sweet too. Love in itself can never be an animal passion. Love always elevates the character of man. It never lowers him, provided love be love. You can't call these girls — mad people, as we generally see in films — lovers. They always play in the hands of animals passions. The true love cannot be created. It comes of its own accord, nobody can say when. It is but natural. And I may tell you that a young man and a young girl can love each other, and with the aid of their love they can overcome the passions themselves and can maintain their purity. I may clear one thing here; when I said that love has human weakness, I did not say it for an ordinary human being at this stage, where the people generally are. But that is most idealistic stage when man would overcome all these sentiments, the love, the hatred, and so on. When man will take reason as the sole basis of his activity. But at present it is not bad, rather good and useful to man. And moreover while rebuking the love, I rebuked the love of one individual for one, and that too in idealistic stage. And even then, man must have the strongest feelings of love which he may not confine to one individual and may make it universal. Now I think I have cleared my position. One thing I may tell you to mark; we in spite of all radical ideas that we cherish, have not been able to do away with the overidealistic Arya Samajist conception of morality. We may talk glibly about all the radical things that can possible be conceived, but in practical life we begin to tremble at the very outset. This I will request you do away with. And may I, without fear at all the misapprehension in my mind, request you do kindly lower the standard of your over-idealism a bit, not to be harsh to those who will live behind and will be the victims of a disease as myself? Don't rebuke them and thus add to their woes and miseries. They need your sympathy. May I repeat that you, without bearing any sort of grudge against any particular individual, will sympathise with those who needed the most? But you cannot realise these things unless and until you yourself fall a victim to this. But, why I am writing all this? I wanted to be frank. I have cleared my heart.

Wish you all success and happy life.

Yours,
B. S

Appendix C

The April 5, 1929 Letter to Sukhdev written by Bhagat Singh was recovered from Sukhdev Thapar during his arrest on April 13, 1929. The British prosecution produced the letter as a material exhibit in the historic Lahore Conspiracy Case to probe the personal and ideological dynamics of the revolutionaries.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL JUDGEMENT ON SUKHDEV

Excerpt:

It is not stated by Phonindra Nath Ghosh that Sukh Dev was a member of the meeting which planned to throw a bomb in the assembly hall, Delhi, but that Sukh Dev knew of this project is sufficiently evident from a letter Ex.P.137, which is proved to have been written by Bhagat Singh and which from its tenor must be taken to refer to the carrying out of that particular project. This letter is convincingly proved by the evidence of the Handwriting Expert, Mr. Scott (P.W.423) to be in Bhagat Singh's handwriting and its contents complied with the fact that it was recovered during the raid on the Kashmir Building.

Of the three men arrested in that building Jai Gopal had returned from Kohat only one day before the raid and the wording of the letter is such that it could not have been addressed to a subordinate member of the party such as Jai Gopal and similarly it could not have been addressed to Kishori Lal Rattan because it refers amongst other matters, to a third person named Master Ram Shastri which is one of the aliases of Kishori Lal Rattan. It is reasonable conclusion, therefore, that the third man arrested in that house, namely Sukh Dev was the man to whom this letter had been addressed and, moreover, it was clearly written by one leader of the Party to another leader who was also the close friend and confidant of the writer, a relationship which could apply to Bhagat Singh and Sukh Dev.

Source: Waraich, Malwinder Jit Singh, Rajwanti Mann, and Harish Jain, eds. The Hanging of Bhagat Singh, Vol. II: Complete Tribunal Proceedings with Sukhdev's Remarks. Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 2010. 688 pp.

Appendix D

BHAGAT SINGH'S LETTER TO HIS FATHER

Oct. 4, 1930

MY DEAR FATHER,

I was astounded to learn that you had submitted a petition to the members of the Special Tribunal in connection with my defence. This intelligence proved to be too severe a blow to be borne with equanimity. It has upset the whole equilibrium of my mind. I have not been able to understand how you could think it proper to submit such a petition at this stage and in these circumstances. Inspite of all the sentiments and feelings of a father, I don't think you were at all entitled to make such a move on my behalf without even consulting me. You know that in the political field my views have always differed with those of yours. I have always been acting independently without having cared for your approval or disapproval.

I hope you can recall to yourself that since the very beginning you have been trying to convince me to fight my case very seriously and to defend myself properly. But you also know that I was always opposed to it. I never had any desire to defend myself and never did I seriously think about it. Whether it was a mere vague ideology or that I had certain arguments to justify my position, is a different question and that cannot be discussed here.

You know that we have been pursuing a definite policy in this trial. Every action of mine ought to have been consistent with that policy, my principle and my programme. At present the circumstances are altogether different, but had the situation been otherwise, even then I would have been the last man to offer defence. I had only one idea before me throughout the trial, i.e. to show complete indifference towards the trial inspite of serious nature of the charges against us. I have always been of opinion that all the political workers should be indifferent and should never bother about the legal fight in the law courts and should boldly bear the heaviest possible sentences inflicted upon them. They may defend themselves but always from purely political considerations and never from a personal point of view. Our policy in this trial has always been consistent with this principle; whether we were successful in that or not is not for me to judge. We have always been doing our duty quite disinterestedly.

In the statement accompanying the text of Lahore Conspiracy Case Ordinance the Viceroy had stated that the accused in this case were trying to bring both law and justice into contempt. The situation afforded us an opportunity to show to the public whether we were trying to bring law into contempt or whether others were doing so. People might disagree with us on this point. You might be one of them. But that never meant that such moves should be made on my behalf without my consent or even my knowledge. My life is not so precious, at least to me, as you may probably think it to be. It is not at all worth buying at the cost of my principles. There are other comrades of mine whose case is as serious as that of mine. We had adopted a common policy and we shall stand to the last, no matter how dearly we have to pay individually for it.

Father, I am quite perplexed. I fear I might overlook the ordinary principle of etiquette and my language may become a little but harsh while criticizing or rather censoring this move on your part. Let me be candid. I feel as though I have been stabbed at the back. Had any other person done it, I would have considered it to be nothing short of treachery. But in your case, let me say that it has been a weakness — a weakness of the worst type.

This was the time where everybody's mettle was being tested. Let me say, father, you have failed. I know you are as sincere a patriot as one can be. I know you have devoted your life to the cause of Indian independence, but why, at this moment, have you displayed such a weakness? I cannot understand.

In the end, I would like to inform you and my other friends and all the people interested in my case, that I have not approved of your move. I am still not at all in favour of offering any defence. Even if the court had accepted that petition submitted by some of my co-accused regarding defence, etc., I would have not defended myself. My applications submitted to the Tribunal regarding my interview during the hunger strike, were misinterpreted and it was published in the press that I was going to offer defence, though in reality I was never willing to offer any defence. I still hold the same opinion as before. My friends in the Borstal Jail will be taking it as a treachery and betrayal on my part. I shall not even get an opportunity to clear my position before them.

I want that public should know all the details about this complication, and, therefore, I request you to publish this letter.

Your loving son
Bhagat Singh

Appendix E

BK DUTT'S LETTER TO SARDAR KISHAN SINGH

(Sardar Bhagat Singh's close companion, Batukeshwar Dutt, who is at present confined as a life prisoner in the Central Jail at Salem in the Madras Presidency, wrote the following letter to his dear friend and comrade Bhagat Singh's father, Sardar Kishan Singh)

My respected Sardarji,

This is the first time in my life that I am writing a letter to you. Even at this grave moment, when I am struggling to begin this letter while my dear brother Bhagat Singh is being hanged at the gallows of the most important end of his life, I find it difficult to put pen to paper.

Nevertheless, compelled by circumstances, I am writing these few words. You will forgive me if they cause pain to your heart.

Sardarji! You know very well what my relationship with Bhagat Singh was. It was a beautiful bond of fraternal affection and true friendship that had strengthened our mutual responsibilities and relationship in the service of humanity. That very feeling is today creating a storm in my heart and compelling me to make a humble request to the authorities: at a time when the darkness of oppression is gathering thickly over the head of my beloved brother, if, unfortunately, I cannot stand beside him, then at the very least, may I be allowed to have a last glimpse of my friend's smiling face, offer my feelings as a final tribute, and, at this moment of physical separation, embrace him one last time and bid him farewell.

But I am deeply grieved that the authorities have, with deaf ears, rejected the request of a man who, after the sorrowful loss of his dearest friend, is destined to remain alive and die within the high walls of a prison. They have cancelled my application to meet Bhagat Singh without even experiencing or understanding that incomparable bond of love and brotherhood which we shared and which had no parallel in the world.

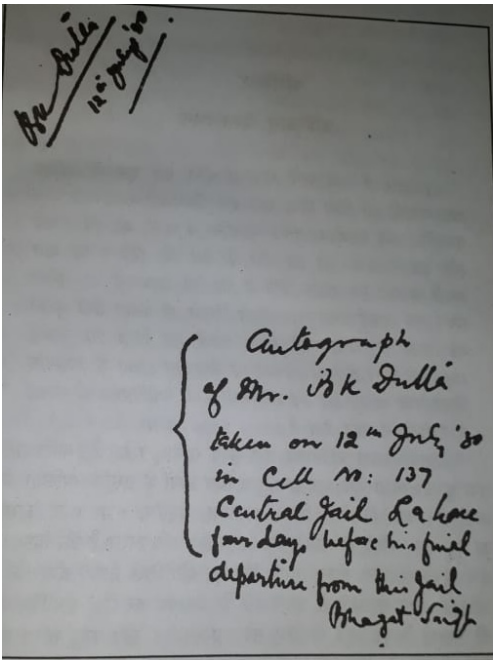
If possible, please convey these feelings and these experiences of mine to Sardar Bhagat Singh. At this moment I feel:

"The trial is severe; let there be no complaint in love;
We shall meet again after parting; let there be no apprehension in the heart."

Yours,
Batukeshwar Dutt

Source: Verma, Anil. Batukeshwar Dutt: Bhagat Singh Ke Sahyogi [Batukeshwar Dutt: Bhagat Singh's Associate]. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010.

Appendix F
FACSIMILE OF BHAGAT SINGH'S JAIL DIARY



B.K. Dutt's signature at the top left corner along with Bhagat Singh's note.

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